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# Fear and Loathing in American Literature: Freedom, the American Dream, and Hunter S. Thompson

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Fear and loathing in American literature:  
freedom, the American dream, and Hunter S. Thompson

by

Elric James Colvill

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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## Abstract

This study of Hunter S. Thompson's earliest published works (1965-1972), specifically *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, seeks to justify their inclusion in the modern American literary canon as examples of post-modern, countercultural works that speak to concerns and worries from that time and that still bear lessons of continuing importance to modern audiences. In order to make this case the study seeks to refute the negative interpretations of critics such as W. Ross Winterowd that fail to recognize the deeper implications of Thompson's Gonzo literary style. Thompson's works are studied from journalistic and literary critical points of view in order to illustrate how they hold true to ethical journalistic principles while operating outside of standard literary conventions for their time, and how both journalism and literature have come to embrace techniques that Thompson pioneered. The final goal of the study is to show how these sixties and seventies era texts continue to hold lessons for modern audiences, specifically when it comes to scrutinizing the information they absorb, in order to understand what is true, and what has been altered by personal bias or misinformation. It also seeks to explain why Thompson has thus far been overlooked as a literary figure by analyzing aspects of his psychology that led to him to destroy his credibility, and how these personal flaws should not affect interpretations of his best, early works.

## Chapter 1: Introduction to Fear and Loathing in American Literature

Hunter S. Thompson (1937 – 2005) remains both a famous and infamous figure in American history. He was the father of Gonzo journalism, a proud counter-cultural rebel voice, and a defender of personal freedoms, sometimes to the extreme. His cult of personality remains strong in popular culture through film treatments of his life and works, comic strips such as *Doonesbury*, and other media forms –including a role-playing game supplement for the *Aberrant* game system. However, this has proven to be as much a curse as a blessing. Few recognize his tremendous impact in the field of creative non-fiction and experiential journalism and as a key voice of the counter-cultural movement of the sixties and seventies. In fact critics such as W. Ross Winterowd and Louis Menand regard his work as little more than popular fluff and the ravings of a drug-soaked ego-maniac, telling the reader nothing of importance beyond the writer's own experience. One example of this thorough misinterpretation comes from literary critic Winterowd:

The main problem with gonzo journalism as practiced by Thompson is its singular uninformativeness: one learns a good deal about the author, very little about his subject. *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*, for instance, is an intense account of Thompson's prejudices, neuroses, and devotion to alcohol and drugs, but hardly either a portrait of the candidates (McGovern and Nixon) or an analysis of the issues.

(91)

Another example comes from Menand, who dismissed Thompson's writing as "juvenile," or like "Holden Caulfield afraid to grow up" (Grubb 5). This opinion is not uncommon among critics because a proper interpretation of Thompson's writing requires a kind of analysis that studies the texts from a non-linear, multi-dimensional perspective. Therefore it is my goal to

illustrate how this kind of analysis is performed in order to properly understand and judge Thompson's work, in particular his earliest texts: *Hell's Angels*, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*.

It is easy to get lost in Thompson's drugs, booze, and profanity, but when analyzed properly these aspects that Winterowd sees as a barrier to understanding Thompson act as a means of magnifying his message. Thompson speaks as a voice from the edge, situated among those that society keeps at arm's length at all costs, and how these people pursue the American Dream in different ways and view their nation from a perspective unfamiliar to the majority. Furthermore I will show how Thompson's earliest works hold important lessons that transcend his own time, especially when it comes to questioning the authority of information and dispelling ignorance, which is vitally important in the modern digital information age.

In order to analyze these texts and situate them within the larger body of American literature I will first define Gonzo journalism, and how it functions within the realm of journalistic theory and ethics. Subsequently, it is also important to consider Thompson's works within the context of modern literary theory, and what is required to interpret them. Once that is done, the true work of analyzing Thompson's texts begins, in particular how his central theme – the pursuit of the American Dream and personal freedom – is revealed in all of his works, from his pure journalism to his creative texts.

The ultimate goal of this study is to reveal that Thompson's work goes far beyond the negative interpretations that Winterowd and other like-minded critics hold. While Thompson's writing focused upon a particular period of time, his lessons about the need for

people to learn how to protect their rights remain timeless. His early works in particular deserve a place within the American literary canon as important post-modern texts, which extol the virtues of questioning authority and scrutinizing information in order to enlighten and protect the individual citizen from those who would seek to take advantage of ignorance and fear.

## Chapter 2: Journalistic Theory, Ethics, and the Tao of Gonzo.

More than forty years have passed since the new journalism movement was born, and what seemed so new then has become commonplace now, bringing the public more experiential stories, coming from people actively involved in the reporting process – investigative reports, imbedded reporters in the field offering real-time news, and even the impact of the so-called “blogosphere” and constant up-to-the-minute news coverage. People want to know what others are experiencing, right now, and not just learn about what the reporter saw. In regards to the literary work of the new journalists it allows people to see how the author views everything he or she has seen, to observe the world through his or her eyes and feel his or her emotions as these experiences occur, satisfying a natural voyeuristic urge to know what others experience.

In order to analyze Gonzo in a literary context, it must have a basis of comparison within the realm of professional journalism and its principles. For this purpose I refer to the nine principles of journalistic ethics, as defined by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel in their work *The Elements of Journalism*:

1. Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
8. It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.



9. Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

(12-13)

Kovach and Rosenstiel then explain the absence of a term on the above list that sees a great deal of attention in the present news media: “Fairness and balance” (13). Their absence, Kovach and Rosenstiel state, reflects the ambiguity of the term – it defies any conclusive definition, and as such remains open to interpretation. This applies in particular to the concept of journalistic neutrality, which Kovach and Rosenstiel regard as “being so mangled it now is usually used to describe the very problem it was conceived to correct” (13).

It is in this gray area between the essential principles of journalism and the myth of journalistic neutrality that Gonzo thrives. Gonzo is a form of stream-of-consciousness narrative that blends aspects of literary journalism and creative non-fiction – utilizing narrative form and fictionalized literary personae combined with journalistic influences in order to craft a story. The author’s literary persona operates as the axis of the story, and everything in it revolves around his experiences, revealing the writer’s unvarnished, uncensored feelings as the story unfolds. Simultaneously, the author himself makes observations on the story as it occurs, remaining separate from his persona within the story.

Gonzo’s greatest strength lies in a sense of immediacy, offering an unobstructed view of current events, creating powerful mental images from the author’s point of view. In addition to Gonzo’s imagistic qualities, Thompson makes extensive use of humor to draw attention to the subject of the report. He seeks to make others laugh at what he perceives to be ridiculous or bizarre as he reports what he sees and feels at a particular moment in time. He then invites his audience into the process of creation itself, the crafting of the story, from his position as both author and character in the story. In essence, his stories focus on the

genesis of the story itself as much as they seek to study the subject of the story in question, which Chance and McKeen describe as a kind of “metajournalism” (102). Thompson leaves himself in the story, but as a kind of alter-ego, such as Dr. Thompson or Raoul Duke in his novels. The Thompson in the story acts as an avatar or a proxy for the real person, and does things that the author wouldn’t, couldn’t, and more often than not shouldn’t, do in reality. Critic John Hellmann also comments on this idea: “The created persona is essentially defined by the title phrase ‘fear and loathing,’ for it embodies both the paranoia with which the persona perceives the ominous forces pervading actuality, and the aggression with which he seeks to survive it” (71).

An example of the use of this metajournalistic avatar or persona can be found in the following section from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, while Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo are sitting among several hundred police investigators in a conference hall while high on mescaline:

The first session – the opening remarks – lasted most of the afternoon. We sat patiently through the first two hours, although it was clear from the start that we weren’t going to Learn anything and it was equally clear that we’d be crazy to try any Teaching. It was easy enough to sit there with a head full of mescaline and listen to hour after hour of irrelevant gibberish... There was certainly no risk involved. These poor bastards didn’t know mescaline from macaroni. (143)

The absurdity of the entire situation juxtaposes those with knowledge and experience with illicit drugs (Raoul and Dr. Gonzo) against those without (the police). The officers are attempting to educate each other in how to handle situations they know nothing about, even as two unofficial representatives of the drug culture they seek to stop sit among them. This

inversion of class and authority is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's study of carnival in *Rabelais and His World* and how Rabelais used the grotesque and unreal to invert the relationship between the social elite and the outsiders. In her doctoral dissertation on literary journalism, Catherine Jane Harred cites Hunter S. Thompson as a modern practitioner of the carnivalesque in literature, especially with regards to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*:

For Thompson's work, both the content of his narratives and their structure is a carnival. Carnival appears in his texts not only as a set of behaviors or as a cultural ritual, but also as a means of structuring his narratives and as a way of analyzing, representing, and acting upon culture... Thompson's narratives make no attempt to announce their seriousness by employing the mystifications of Art or Literature, no attempt to rescue themselves from their association with the low and the marginal, which carnival celebrates (96-97).

Thompson always considered himself an outsider in American society, someone on the low-end of the social pyramid, and his goal through all his writing was to use this carnivalesque style to overturn the order as it stood. In the case of the National District Attorney's conference, Raoul and Dr. Gonzo, the self-admitted drug fiends that they were, effectively stood above those who represented law and order when it came to a subject that they were more than familiar about. After the section I cited above from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Raoul goes on to explain, in scientific detail, the differences, advantages, and disadvantages of mescaline versus a more potent psychedelic, LSD. His knowledge of drugs, their effects, and the culture that still subscribed to their use is far more detailed and accurate than those who sought to crush the growing drug culture. The fact was, as Raoul Duke

explained, the drug culture of the sixties was dead or dying, with only a few hardcore adherents left, such as Dr. Gonzo and himself. The major threat, as the absurdity in the above situation shows, is ignorance, fed by misinformation and misguided assumptions.

Even though *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a novel, it still follows the same journalistic impulses that Thompson's non-fictional gonzo writing does, and this corresponds to points one, two, and eight of Kovach and Rosenstiel's nine principles of journalism in particular: an obligation to tell the truth, to be loyal to the citizens, and to exercise the writer's own conscience. In this case Thompson is compelled to offer his knowledge of the subject (drugs, the drug culture, and their effects on American society) and expose how those in a position of authority are misrepresenting and misunderstanding the causes and effects of the problem, and the people need to know the truth. Thompson the journalist sought the truth of things, and Thompson the rebel sought to question authority, and so Thompson the writer combined these two aspects to offer an alternative forum of thought for ideas that went against commonly accepted facts, as held by the police investigators in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Carl Hausman in *Crisis of Conscience* describes another real-world scenario where commonly accepted fact was proven false with only a small amount of additional research, but not before this fact was reported to the public:

Accuracy and objectivity is as much related to individual integrity and judgment as to any particular technique of news gathering. The journalists who bought into the scenario created by Charles Stuart were not evil, stupid, or illogical. They were simply garden-variety humans who identified with the victims and let the "images in their heads" justify the confected scenario.

Often, this meant accepting and repeating information uncritically without challenging it or submitting it to any test for logic or consistency. But this is hardly a crime unique to the press... Aristotle posited that the brain serves no function in the process of thought (We now know this to be true of only some people) (40).

This situation was created by those who did not dig deep enough to find the truth, which often occurs when journalists stand at such a distance from the news they attempt to report. Thompson therefore abandoned the concept of journalistic distance in favor of a more immersive approach, and one he believed would eliminate many of the problems he saw in the current news media.

Objectivity is a myth, since any analysis of a report's truth and factuality is subjective, based upon the thoughts and beliefs of the person performing the analysis. Any time information passes from one person to another it also passes through that individual's subjective filter and how they perceive the situation in question. Humans do not function based on pure logic, guileless as computers, or as faultless as photographic images. As Thompson said in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, "With the possible exception of things like box scores, race results, and stock market tabulations, there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms" (48). Given the state of the news media today, his statement remains pertinent, when every news outlet attempts to represent their reporting as the most "fair and balanced." Raw statistics don't lie, but as soon as a human being passes information to another human being, natural human subjectivity alters the state of the presented data. What remains then is to present the facts as they are seen and experienced, so that information can be passed on for the individual to interpret in their own way while possessing as much true and factual data as

possible. When Neil Henry began his class on journalism, his first lesson to his young, eager students was to “Always know exactly where you are. In many ways, you guys are explorers. Your responsibility is to bear witness to the truth *as you see and hear it*, and to tell it accurately, especially for people who aren’t there with you to see it for themselves” (5).

Henry, like Kovach and Rosenstiel, agree that the major role of the news media is to inform the public so that they possess the knowledge to uphold and protect Democracy and civil rights (Henry 5), and that the news must be reported as accurately as possible. Given the author-centric and openly opinionated nature of Gonzo, the accuracy of Thompson’s reporting does present some issues when analyzing and interpreting his writing. How does he accurately inform the public so that they can access the knowledge necessary to protect their rights when the author involves himself so directly in the story, which according to standard journalistic practices presents an ethical dilemma? The answer lies in the immediacy of Thompson’s message, the unfiltered words passed onto the reading public, and Thompson’s personal ethos, originally built on more conventional reporting practices.

With the publication of *Hell’s Angels: the Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*, Thompson demonstrated that sometimes the only way to get to the heart of a dangerous story was to directly involve the author in the subject. What he did in getting to the heart of the Hell’s Angels story was something very unusual for the time: he buried himself inside the gang overtly, acting as a public eye within the gang while remaining separate from their ranks, convincing them to allow him to exist among them as a journalistic entity that would not misrepresent them in the national news media. It was dangerous, and up to that point no reporter had ever come that close to the Angels. Their natural distrust of the media ran deep, but Thompson gained their trust and respect by learning to live by their rules

(Weingarten 134). His primary goal when imbedding himself within the gang was to find out just how many of the rumors spread by the news media, even normally respected outlets such as the *New York Times*, were accurate. America, fueled by rumors of gang rapes, assaults, and brutal slayings, believed it was on the verge of war with a tribe of modern barbarian raiders. Thompson's quest then was to verify if the American public's fears were justified, by getting to know the Hell's Angels on a personal level, following Kovach and Rosenstiel's nine principles of journalism precisely.

Before delving deep into the individual hoodlum psyche though, there were a battery of "facts" concerning the Angels that the media propagated that Thompson had to address first – and the most prominent source of Hell's Angels hysteria came from a document called the Lynch Report, written by Attorney General Lynch of California, detailing over a thousand misdemeanors and a hundred and fifty-some felonies, all attributed to the Angels over the course of their club's founding (Thompson 51). It also claims the membership of almost a thousand Angels, portraying them as a plague of locusts on motorcycles. The truth of the matter was that the Lynch report was grossly exaggerated, and its spread was facilitated by the media – the *New York Times* specifically (Thompson 50-51), and Weingarten wrote that "In Thompson's view, the Lynch Report poisoned the well; its fallacies were taken as gospel truth by reporters who were all too eager to perpetuate them" (Weingarten 142-143). Thus, Thompson's first step in seeking the truth required him to analyze pre-existing reports and verify their authenticity. In this case, his initial reports revealed a reporting fallacy not unlike the example of the Charles Stuart debacle mentioned earlier, where reporters jumped on the story before accumulating all the facts of the case. The

data was not analyzed or scrutinized sufficiently before it was accepted as fact and then presented to the American public.

In essence he was practicing a form of Ethnographic journalism – fully immersing himself within a group in order to learn about them from observation and close interaction (Cramer, Janet, and McDevitt 12), and by exposing the beliefs and practices of this subculture he would either validate or disprove the negative myths and rumors surrounding them. However, the form he adopted to tell their story moved Thompson into the realm of the New Journalists – those writers who were experimenting with the dividing line between fiction and non-fiction during the sixties, such as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and Tom Wolfe. What all these writers shared, despite differences in individual styles and subjects, was an appreciation for the narrative form and how it could turn a report on a subject into an engrossing story – a non-fictional novel.

Literary theorists and critics have had trouble with these types of texts though, as G.L. Newgaard states in his thesis on Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and how the confusion about its place within literature makes it difficult to properly understand and teach it as a literary text:

*In Cold Blood* clearly falls into [the] broad definition of creative nonfiction; however, a significant body of critical literature has been devoted to more specific designations of the book, attempting to situate it within the various sub-genres and categories of creative nonfiction. Critics have attempted to label it from both the fiction and journalistic/nonfiction perspectives. Those who designate books such as *In Cold Blood* as a novel use the terms “documentary novel,” “realistic novel,” and “nonfiction novel.” From a nonfiction viewpoint the book has been identified as



“New Journalism,” “literary journalism,” and “literary nonfiction.” Identification with so many different terms and concepts has itself created some confusion and much disagreement among critics as to just where *In Cold Blood* fits as a literary work. (7-8)

Newgaard sees *In Cold Blood*'s genre-bridging nature as a point of contention when it comes to defining where it sits within a specific literary category, and this problem complicates critical evaluations. The same applies to *Hell's Angels* which went one step further in placing the author directly within the text as a character that not only observed the action, but acted as a participant. Tom Wolfe explains the reason for this focus in *The New Journalism*, where he defines the nature of “New Journalism” and its blending of journalistic and fiction-writing techniques as a means to create greater “emotional involvement” and develop a more “gripping and absorbing quality” than straight journalism proved capable of achieving (Newgaard 8). This was the very issue Capote faced when he was seeking a subject for his first major long-nonfiction project. As Newgaard relates, Capote was seeking material that “would not date” as quickly as most journalistic subjects. He sought a topic that would affect the reader beyond the basic facts of the case and confront issues that were more universal. To this end he found an article on the 1959 Clutter family slayings in Kansas (10-11). The subject, the horror of a mass-murder in a sleepy Mid-Western town that destroyed the community's sense of innocence, was the kind of core issue that would allow *In Cold Blood* to resist the “dating” that Capote remarked was such a weakness of straight journalism (Newgaard 10). For Thompson, the Hell's Angels and their unusual existence and role within the countercultural movement of the sixties also presented a similar opportunity – to illustrate how America was still so fractured, not only in regards to race, but also class, and the story

of the Angels is one of class struggle, even within the blanket category of the “counterculture.” An example of this class conflict within the counterculture appears when the Angels formed their unlikely alliance with the SDS. Christopher Gair comments on this point in his book *The American Counterculture*:

In addition to the fragmentation along racial lines, it was evident that the [SDS] movement would not be able to establish the kind of lasting, significant alliances across class barriers for which it had hoped. Hunter S. Thompson identified one instance of these tensions when he highlights the breakdown of relations between the SDS and the Hell’s Angels in California. (126)

Gair then cites a section from *Hells Angels* that best illustrates this breakdown, when the Hell’s Angels involved themselves in a massive anti-war march in Berkeley in 1965, though not on the side their would-be SDS allies had hoped:

The Angels blew it in 1965, at the Oakland-Berkeley line, when they... attacked the front ranks of an anti-war march. This proved to be an historic schism in the then Rising Tide of the Youth Movement of the Sixties. It was the first open break between the Greasers and the Longhairs, and the importance of that break can be read in the history of the SDS, which eventually destroyed itself in the doomed effort to reconcile the interests of the lower/working class biker/dropout types and the upper/middle, Berkeley/student activists. (Gair 126-127)

Thompson revealed to Americans the profoundly fractured nature of American society, even for those counted among the counterculture, and how it was impossible to lump together all the many subcultures into one massive countercultural super-group. This concept of class and ideological conflict, the desire to express the self and to belong to something greater, and the

need to resist and question authority is universal, and though the turbulent sixties are long past the lessons to be learned from that era are timeless. While many countercultural writers wrote on these themes, Thompson spoke from among the seething horde, at the heart of one of America's most feared gangs, in order to educate others and to test the supposed facts that the media was spreading. Unlike his contemporary Tom Wolfe who, as Scott MacFarlane said, "wrote as a fly on the wall" (178), Thompson was in the middle of it all, and had the scars to prove it, granting him a certain amount of credibility when discussing these issues from such a personal point of view.

Thus Thompson projected all that he saw, smelled, heard, and felt onto the page in order to viscerally connect readers to his subjects, so that they could experience all these sensations and understand the information that Thompson presented to them on a highly personal level. Then with all the information Thompson gathered from inside and outside the gang he came to the conclusion that America had not received enough accurate and verifiable information to make a proper judgment on the Hell's Angels, and that their place within the larger counterculture was more complex than most Americans originally believed. Thompson achieves this feat in a number of ways, but one of the most important comes through the use of the personal story – either from his own point of view, or that of another person interviewed. Using interviews in a news story has always been a key component of journalism, but the stories Thompson's sources told and how he presented them as a continuous narrative gives them additional impact in *Hell's Angels* as they helped to build a larger, more accurate picture of the Angels as human beings. In "The Making of the Menace," the second part of *Hell's Angels* detailing the rise of the gang to national prominence, one scene in particular illustrates the oddly conflicting nature of the Angels in

opposition to their public image. In one such instance a filling-station owner discussed with Thompson his rather unusual run-in with the outlaw gang:

About thirty of them roared into my station one night. They said they needed a place to work on their bikes. I took one look at them and told them the place was theirs, and got the hell out of there in a hurry... After an hour or so I finally summoned the courage to go back and see if my place was still standing... The Angels were just finishing up. I was never so surprised in my whole life. The place was spotless. They had washed every tool with gasoline and hung it back up exactly where they found it. They even swept the floor. The place was actually cleaner than when they first came in. (112-113)

“Stories like this are common” Thompson notes (113) and it serves as one of the many odd things about the Angels that twisted others’ thoughts about them. Thompson seized emotions by offering a window into the daily lives, thoughts, and beliefs of the Angels, illustrating how the many conflicting views of the Angels complete a whole picture – the good and the bad represented in equal measure. He worked against public hysteria, as well as the media’s dehumanization of the Angels by humanizing them in narrative supported by hard research and deep personal immersion in his subject. As Mikal Gilmore remarked, Thompson saw these men as “vulnerable to all manner of dangers and disenchantment” and that they were “lost men, fuckups who had no hopes and who found a meaning in their hardbitten solidarity – but they were also a new breed of dangerous subculture” (239). At the end, even after Thompson’s violent break with the gang, once all the information was presented he left his final judgment open to the readers.

His work on *Hell's Angels* is therefore more overtly in line with the essential principles of journalism as outlined by Kovach and Rosenstiel earlier, but Thompson would further widen the gap between journalistic ethics and literary classification when he began to develop his unique Gonzo style of story-telling. This acts as the critical dividing line for such critics as Winterowd, who give *Hell's Angels* its due as a piece of literary journalism, but fail to grasp the deeper complexities of Gonzo as an equally insightful and stylistically sound form of literary expression. Its seemingly senseless, random form and its propensity for mixing the fictional with the factual can lead to critical confusion, and therefore several critics disregard Thompson's Gonzo texts as an area worthy of closer study.

With this in mind, I will analyze Thompson's most significant Gonzo texts, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, and illustrate how Thompson communicates his ideas within a seemingly chaotic framework, but one that when properly understood actually magnifies the importance of the issues addressed in the texts.

### Chapter 3: Literary Analysis and the Gonzo Lens.

As defined earlier, Gonzo is by nature stream-of-consciousness narrative, or at least appears that way, with a jumble of thoughts flowing out onto the page, with one jangled idea leading to another. The deeper truth, however, is that even the chaotic Gonzo writing style carefully engineers its approach to a specific point, moving towards it not in a linear fashion, but more as a spiral, descending down from a general point of view and drifting around the central idea until it winds its way closer and closer to the ultimate point. Through this method one can observe the many different sides of the central issue. Like many inventions though, Gonzo's genesis came as an accident, an experiment born from desperation. In this accidental creation though, Thompson found his real voice and style, and the most effective means for him to communicate his views and ideas: a mixture of unfiltered thought and unrestricted questioning combined with a natural sense of humor to draw readers in, to connect them to the text intellectually and emotionally. Where critics like Winterowd get caught up in the grotesqueness of Thompson's Gonzo style and see it as his reality, I will illustrate, with sections from "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, why Thompson chose this style to present his views and ideas, and how it communicates these ideas so effectively.

The progenitor of all Gonzo literature came from an article Thompson wrote for the short-lived magazine *Scanlan's Monthly* in 1970. Thompson's mission on behalf of *Scanlan's* took him to his birthplace in Kentucky, where he met with English sketch-artist Ralph Steadman to cover the Kentucky Derby, on rather short notice (Weingarten 235). He intended to produce a straight piece of journalism, but with limited time to produce his work

and a number of obstacles to overcome, not the least of which was a dire lack of any form of press credentials, Thompson fell back on a lesson he learned from an article he wrote earlier.

The first tenet of Gonzo – that the story should focus on the experiences of the author interacting with the subject – came unintentionally from an article Thompson did in 1968, “The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy” (McKeen 36). Initially it was meant to be a straight-forward profile of the Olympic skier Jean-Claude Killy and his sudden rise to commercial fame, but Thompson encountered a few problems in the course of his duties; namely, that Killy was reluctant to open up about himself, that he proved overly defensive when the topic of his commercial contracts entered the conversation, and worse still, that his dull and avaricious nature made him an unappealing subject to interview (McKeen 36-37). With such a difficult subject and a rapidly closing deadline, Thompson decided to focus the article on himself and his attempts to get the drab and defensive Killy to open up about himself.

Despite the journalistically atypical course Thompson took with the story, it proved successful owing to Thompson’s wit and writing flare. When the deadline for Thompson’s new Kentucky Derby article approached, he knew he would not be able to complete his assignment on time in the more traditional fashion. Therefore he fell back on his author-centric point-of-view style, especially after exposing himself to the Kentucky Derby crowd up close. However, unlike the Killy article, the rough edges of this article were more obvious, since he had to send his “raw, unedited notes” to *Scanlan’s*, producing a piece of writing that, in critic Peter O. Whitmer’s words, “struck a nerve that was directly connected to the increasing fragmentation of American culture” (87). Thompson’s knowledge of his home state and his native culture granted him greater knowledge of the Derby crowd than

most of his readership possessed, and in this sub-culture he saw something that had become utterly debased; a symbol of the decay he saw reflected in his own culture and in Southern society in general.

Thompson begins his journey in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” as he steps off the plane and takes a seat in the airport lounge, where he runs into his first avatar of debased Southern gentility:

In the air-conditioned lounge I met a man from Houston who said his name was something or other – “but just call me Jimbo” – and he was here to get it on. “I’m ready for *anything*, by God! Anything at all. Yeah, what are you drinkin?” I ordered a Margarita with ice, but he wouldn’t hear of it: “Naw, naw... what the hell kind of drink is that for Kentucky Derby time? What’s *wrong* with you, boy?” He grinned and winked at the bartender: “Goddam, we gotta educate this boy. Get him some good *whiskey*...”

“Look.” He tapped me on the arm to make sure I was listening. “I know this Derby crowd, I come here every year, and let me tell you one thing I’ve learned – this is no town to be giving people the impression you’re some kind of faggot. Not in public, anyway. Shit, they’ll roll you in a minute, knock you in the head and take every goddamn cent you have” (263).

Thompson seems to immediately run directly into a southern stereotype – the blustering, testosterone-bloated Texan – and immediate surface judgments pass between the author and the character of “Jimbo.” The Texan immediately latches onto Thompson’s drink of choice as a weakness, something that might identify him as a homosexual among the other Derby-



goers, and thus define him as being weak in their cultural worldview, and even someone to be preyed upon.

With the sense of “otherness” and difference in place, represented by the divide between Thompson’s reality and Jimbo’s perceived reality of Thompson, created by a snap judgment based upon something (Thompson’s drink) that symbolizes an alien element in their environment, Thompson then inverts this native/outsider relationship. As Harred’s Carnavalesque interpretation of Gonzo implies, Thompson seeks to invert the power structure between himself and the Texan by playing upon what the Texan would fear the most – difference, chaos, and otherness in his world. After the Texan inquires about Thompson’s purpose at the Derby, and he comments that he came to shoot photos of the race, he then mentions a rumor. The rumor’s purpose exists only to do one thing - instill fear in the Texan:

I shook my head and said nothing; just stared at him for a moment, trying to look grim. “There’s going to be trouble,” I said. “My assignment is to take pictures of the riot.”

“What riot?”

I hesitated, twirling the ice in my drink. “At the track. On Derby Day. The Black Panthers.” I stared at him again. “Don’t you read the newspapers?” (264)

As the Texan panics at this news Thompson inflates his fears even further, with reports that the FBI and the military are on their way, along with a bunch of white supremacists who plan to stir up the mob in a frenzy before there’s all-out race war at the track. “Oh... Jesus! What in the name of God is happening to this country? Where can you get *away* from it?” Jimbo said before Thompson continued on his journey (265).

This illustrates one of Thompson's major social points, acting as a kind of thesis for the rest of the article. Social and racial strife was in the here, now, and everywhere. The fear spread further than the truth, infecting everyone along the way. More images of America in turmoil came from the press as Thompson continued on, picking up a newspaper as he passed a dispenser in the hallway.

"Nixon Sends GI's into Cambodia to Hit Reds" ... "B-52's Raid, then 2,000 GI's Advance 20 Miles" ... "4,000 U.S. Troops Deployed Near Yale as Tension Grows Over Panther Protest." At the bottom of the page was a photo of Diane Crump, soon to become the first woman jockey ever to ride in the Kentucky Derby. The photographer had snapped her "stopping in the barn area to fondle her mount, Fathom." The rest of the paper was spotted with ugly war news and stories of "student unrest." There was no mention of any trouble brewing at a university in Ohio called Kent State. (265)

War news, social upheaval, and yet the curious omission of growing trouble at Kent State, which would soon lead to one of the most notorious incidents in American history, when National Guardsmen would open fire on student protesters on the Kent State campus on May 4, 1970, killing and injuring several students (Adamek and Lewis 345). Thompson's coverage of the Derby occurred just a few days before this event, but it all ties into the very first headline Thompson mentions in the newspaper snippet, about Nixon sending troops into Cambodia. Amid all this chaos and turmoil, the spectacle of the Derby continued, immune to outside forces or concerns. In accordance with the tenets of Gonzo though, once the author involves himself in the story, he emerges as an altering force in the story as it unfolds. As he

moves through his own story, soon accompanied by his artist Ralph Steadman, the sense of entropy grows, magnifying the bizarreness of the world around them:

Well... what the hell? We could always load up on acid and spend the day roaming around the clubhouse grounds with big sketch pads, laughing hysterically at the natives and swilling mint juleps so the cops wouldn't think we're abnormal. Perhaps even make the act pay: set up an easel with a big sign saying, "Let a Foreign Artist Paint Your Portrait, \$10 Each. Do It NOW!" (269)

This represents the first time Thompson makes any mention of drug abuse in his Gonzo writing, and here it acts as a kind of trope – a device that makes it obvious that the lens used to observe the world of the story will become warped, that by becoming so altered they can better observe their subjects, but by adopting accepted behaviors (swilling Mint Juleps at the Derby) they can still be seen by the authority figures as essentially “normal” Derby goers, blending into the throng. As Thompson continues his trek through the layers of Derby society, from lobbies to press boxes and eventually into the posh “F&G” clubhouse of the stadium, the true subject of his article reveals itself. And it has nothing to do with horse racing:

But the “walkaround” press passes to F&G were only good for thirty minutes at a time, presumably to allow the newspaper types to rush in and cut for photos or quick interviews, but to prevent drifters like Steadman and me from spending all day in the clubhouse, harassing the gentry and rifling through the odd handbag or two while cruising around the boxes. Or Macing the [swinish Neo-Nazi] governor... unlike most of the others in the press box, we didn't give a hoot in hell what was happening on the track. We had come there to watch the *real* beasts perform. (271)

Rather than address the race itself, Thompson found something more interesting to report on: The Derby culture. The people who came to watch the race proved more of a spectacle than anything else, participants in a tradition that had devolved from an event centered on sportsmanship to an excuse to indulge in extreme behaviors, where any normal constraints drifted away. Thompson saw the Derby as another world, completely “other” and alien to the rest of reality, though the Derby goers considered their world entirely normal. In order to create this sense of otherness though Thompson needed something to compare it against as a kind of reality touchstone. This is where artist Ralph Steadman comes in.

Steadman came from England on behalf of *Scanlan's* to contribute his rather unusual art style, defined by its sense of exaggeration and dismorphic qualities, somewhat like caricature but more twisted and grotesque. Steadman provided Thompson with a “straight man” persona, as someone who had never visited the states before, and had never experienced an event like the Kentucky Derby. His culture shock provided Thompson with a “virginal” view of events, which was shared by most of the article’s readership, giving them a point of connection with the story.

The pair’s intent once they decide to ignore the race itself is to study the people who have come to watch the Derby and observe how the culture that has grown around the race serves as a symbol of what is deeply wrong with the society Thompson came from. He would capture it in words, while Steadman would capture it in art, but in order to begin they needed to find the symbol of Derby degradation – the perfect face to apply to the story as an avatar of all that was wrong with this culture:

He had done a few good sketches, but so far we hadn’t seen that special kind of face that I felt we would need for the lead drawing. It was a face I’d seen a thousand times

at every Derby I'd ever been to. I saw it, in my head, as the mask of the whiskey gentry – a pretentious mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much in-breeding in a closed and ignorant culture... So the face I was trying to find in Churchill Downs that weekend was a symbol, in my own mind, of the whole doomed atavistic culture that makes the Kentucky Derby what it is. (272-273)

Thompson sought a person, a face that would encapsulate everything he loathed about his Kentuckian society, one that he viewed as backwards, degenerate, and reactionary. So the two continued on in search of this representative figure, but rather than moving among the Derby culture as non-interacting observers, as most reporters are taught to do, they instead affected change as they covered their story, usually intentionally, seeming to test the natives for their reactions. Steadman for example would attempt to diffuse tense situations with the locals by sketching people and giving them the pictures, but since his form was so grotesque the intended positive result always left a negative reaction. After that everyone viewed Steadman with “fear and loathing,” which would become Thompson’s key catchphrase from then on (274). The presence of these characters forced the Derby goers to confront alien agents in their midst, who reflected aspects of reality that they may not wish to confront – the ugly, twisted, and debased nature of their sub-culture.

In fact Thompson and Steadman act in a manner very similar to the Trickster of many Native American stories, agents of change and difference that teach lessons to others by forcing them to question the reality of their world and their beliefs. Franchot Ballinger defines the Trickster as a “creatively antinomian overreacher transgressing the artificial codes of society and the categories of human perception that give rise to those codes.” The

Trickster operates at the outer-edge of human reality, placing him in a better position to point out the flaws in human society and show people how to move beyond them, because as an outsider he can see how everything moves by possessing a larger worldview (15).

This principle directly coincides with Thompson's own personal philosophy of writing, since he always acts as an outsider observing others from a close physical proximity, while at the same time maintaining a distant ideology. And where the Trickster becomes involved, the basis of what constitutes reality often comes into question, and the same applies here as Thompson considers the little red notebook he writes his thoughts in. After their time at the local breakfast café he notes, as he looks back on the "battered, shriveled, whiskey-stained book," that everything after that point became scrambled and twisted (275). The view of events becomes distorted, requiring an active mind to untie the many threads of thought in order to discover what binds them together.

The first major area that Thompson focuses on in the second half of the article is the meaning behind faces. The importance of this primary facial avatar, representing the degenerated Derby culture, exists as one smaller part of a larger idea, with other faces holding individual lessons for Thompson. He saw in all the different faces evidence of backwardness, ignorance, perversion, and degradation so profound that it literally defined individual physical form. The societal decay created, in his mind, a physical manifestation clearly observable to any degree of close inspection and study. He considered the faces of the old women of the Derby, their "pink faces with stylish Southern sag, old Ivy styles, seer-sucker coats and buttndown collars. 'Mayblossom Senility' (Steadman's phrase)... burnt out early, or maybe just not much to burn in the first place" (277). These were the matriarchs

of the culture, their lives already spent, seeming to exist now only because of tradition.

Another face caught Steadman's attention soon after:

“Jesus, look at the corruption in that face!” he [Steadman] whispered. “Look at the madness, the fear, the greed!” I looked, then quickly turned my back on the table he was sketching. The face he'd picked out to draw was the face of an old friend of mine, a prep school football star in the good old days with a sleek red Chevy convertible and a very quick hand, it was said, with the snaps of a 32 B brassiere. They called him “Cat Man.”

But now, a dozen years later, I wouldn't have recognized him anywhere but here, where I should have expected to find him, in the Paddock bar on Derby Day... fat slanted eyes and a pimp's smile, blue silk suit and his friends looking like crooked bank tellers on a binge...” (277-278)

This introduces another common Gonzo device, as defined by James N. Stull, which appears in later Gonzo writings such as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *The Great Shark Hunt*, and *The Curse of Lono* – the differing focus and viewpoint of Thompson's culturally-alien partner (163). Steadman, as a foreigner, fixes upon something that to him seems disgusting and alien, and when Thompson looks at it he sees his old friend, changed beyond normal recognition. For Thompson it serves as an ugly reminder of his culture and its nature, and if he had remained in Louisville he may be at that table with “the Cat Man” right now, just another part of the degenerative cycle he saw at the Derby.

Stull also remarks that it reveals Thompson's weakness as a “marginal character, inside and outside of the story,” that he does not react strongly to “the vagaries and vulgarities of American culture to the same degree that Steadman does” (164), requiring an

other-self or an alter-ego to center his view on the world. In fact, Stull says Thompson in all of his stories, from *Hell's Angels* through “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” and through his later Gonzo works, becomes at least partially transformed by the people he covers in the stories (164). Steadman, and Thompson’s later sidekicks, thus also acts as Ego touchstones, balancing his own personality in the stories and offering a kind of binocular vision of events – but each lens sees something different in many cases, and the mind still has to assimilate the two different images into a sensible whole. This is one of the key elements of Gonzo – the assimilation of different points of view into a single reality.

The pair eventually wound their way through the tiers of Derby society until they finally came to the track center – an open grass field in the middle of the track, where the lower-class spectators gathered. As Thompson noted there were none of the normal amenities available here – no bathrooms, tables, benches, or alcohol service. “Too dangerous,” he said, because this was where a man could be crushed or trampled to death as the crowd shifted and pressed together, and no one would know it until the area cleared (280). Thompson and Steadman couldn’t even see the race from there, despite being at the center of it all. The mass of humanity blocked it all out, and the final elements of culture shock got to Ralph Steadman so badly that in the article, once they had finally escaped the Derby he started drinking too heavily, even by Thompson’s standards. Haggard and in need of rest, the pair kept working in order to meet the rapidly approaching deadline. When Ralph burst into Thompson’s motel room near the end of their time in Louisville, in search of more booze, Thompson finally awoke and saw something strange:

I barely heard him. My eyes had finally opened enough for me to focus on the mirror across the room and I was stunned at the shock of recognition. For a confused instant,



I thought Ralph had brought somebody with him – a model for that one special face we’d been looking for. There he was, by God – a puffy, drink-ravaged, disease-ridden caricature... like an awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once-proud mother’s family photo album. It was the face we’d been looking for – and it was, of course, my own. Horrible, horrible... (281)

The conclusion Thompson finally came to represents another common lesson of Gonzo – self-revealing hypocrisy. Thompson went out of his way to find flaws in other people, seeking the perfect symbol of Derby society degradation, but at the end discovers to his horror that he serves as the prime example of what he has been looking for all along. The revelation for Thompson however could not come until his secondary lens – Ralph, the cultural alien – turns it back on him, literally, in a physical reflection. At the very end when Thompson dismisses Ralph in rather manic fashion, hurling insults and vulgarities at him as he speeds away, he symbolically dismisses his alter-ego until he needs it again, when Thompson next requires it to balance his “marginal personality.”

Once published, “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” received widespread critical acclaim, and Thompson’s unique style attracted high praise from critics for its surrealistic story-telling flair while being unusually incisive about a cultural sub-group few knew well. His next project would take him on a much different track than any project he had done before, but the lessons learned during his Kentucky Derby experience proved pivotal to its success, and also helped to solidify the Gonzo form.

While originally working on a news story concerning the murder of a Hispanic activist in southern California, Thompson met with a source, Oscar Zeta Acosta, who was nervous about speaking to the press due to a number of threats leveled against those willing

to speak out. The pressure of the assignment, and the all-too-real danger for Acosta, had worn down Thompson's nerves, so he was ordered to take some time off the story to compose himself. At this time *Sports Illustrated* made Thompson an offer to write a two hundred and fifty word caption, little more than a word box under a picture, for an article on the Mint 400 Motorcycle Race taking place in Las Vegas (Weingarten 234). Thompson saw it as a way to get Acosta out of his own head for a while and get him relaxed so that he would feel freer to talk without fear of reprisals from opponents in southern California. Thompson took the deal and took Acosta to Vegas. However, the project Thompson meant to undertake – writing a short caption and nothing more – turned into a twenty-five hundred word article and was, as Thompson said in the jacket copy of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, “aggressively rejected” (209). However, it served as the basis for a new project; a Gonzo novel, originally published in two parts in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1971 as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: a Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*. At this point Thompson breaks away from journalism infused with fictive elements to true fictional writing based in part on real experiences, allowing the story to move in strange and unrealistic ways while maintaining a foothold in reality as the protagonists journey to find a living idea – the physical manifestation of the American Dream.

#### Chapter 4: Realism, Surrealism, and the World Between in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

Unlike Thompson's previous journalistic work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a novel, but even as a work of fiction it mirrors reality as a kind of quasi-fictional autobiography, heavily exaggerated but based at least marginally in fact. The difference between it and his previous works lies in the amount of creative freedom he took with reality. In "The Kentucky Derby" there exists an abundance of surrealism and exaggeration, but the events all took place in reality to some extent, but the odd, twisted style and nature of the second half of the article – a rushed experiment at that point – became the operating system of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The Gonzo lens focused from the beginning on the strange and over-the-top nature of the characters' sojourn to Las Vegas, and that sense of uneven binocular vision between Thompson and his cohort remains set throughout the novel. The major Gonzo components were all there; two characters, Thompson's persona (in this case "Raoul Duke") and his culturally alien sidekick's persona (Ralph Steadman is replaced by Oscar Zeta Acosta, who is represented by the character "Dr. Gonzo"); an abundance of mind-altering chemicals (booze makes way for harder drugs, supplemented by more booze) in order to properly set the Gonzo lens on a slight tilt and an altered mental state; a primary purpose (covering the Mint 400) which is promptly forgotten in favor of something more interesting (finding the American Dream in Las Vegas).

If Gonzo has a basic formula, this is it – two people cover a story while heavily altered and then find a greater purpose beyond their primary task, and its importance to the characters overshadows any original intent towards the base story. The more important story that emerges differs from the original job in that it appears to be open-ended – a journey towards a goal with no conceivable conclusion. The goal of the Gonzo story lies in the

journey of discovery itself, rather than any destination. In Thompson's writing, beginning with *Hell's Angels*, through "The Kentucky Derby," *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and beyond, the concept of the story being about the journey rather than a destination dominates everything. The same applies to his metajournalistic writing style, as Chance and McKeen mentioned, where the story reveals the process of the story's creation rather than finding a definite conclusion. It's all about discovery and moving outside of the self to better see and understand the world.

Before the novel even begins, it is prefaced with a quote from legendary British writer and social cynic Samuel Johnson: "He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man." Man, when all fetters have been released, when all morals have been cast away, when man suppresses or forgets everything that makes him "civilized," man becomes beast, an entity no longer beholden to social morals or rules. However, Man as he exists now, and has existed for millennia, has always lived at odds with nature, seeking to rise above it, to "civilization," and so binds himself with its laws. The point of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* lies in the conflict between the forces of order and chaos in American society, and how Las Vegas exists as an illusionary utopia for the masses, pretending to represent the freedom of the American Dream when it only degrades the human spirit.

One of the major forces in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, as embodied by Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo, is chaos. Civilization, law, and order abhor chaos, and throughout the novel they act as the polar opposites of these civilized principles. The very journey itself was engaged without any specific sense of purpose beyond a very general story:

The only way to prepare for a trip like this, I felt, was to dress like human peacocks and get crazy, then screech off across the desert and *cover the story*. Never lose sight of the primary responsibility.

But what *was* the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise, the American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it *now*: pure Gonzo journalism. (12)

They had a story to cover, but they didn't know what the story was or what the focus should be. No matter they said, it would all figure itself out, and off they went on their aimless journey. The pair set to work making beasts of themselves, ingesting dangerous amounts of drugs until all pain left and any sense of the real evaporated, and they set off for a destination with no point beyond the vaguest recollections of "a story." They journeyed to what had become the "glitz and glamour destination for the middle-class parents of the 'dope generation,' hoping to strike it rich and fulfill the American Dream" (Banco 136) in America's most unlikely Mecca, Las Vegas. All points made in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* lead back to what Thompson saw as the perversion and corruption of the American Dream, seen through the haze of the Gonzo lens, subjected to the personal madness of the author's twisted literary personae. Once more the carnivalesque that Harred sees in Thompson's writing returns as the main characters continually overturns and upsets normal society as they enter a city which by its very nature straddles all of America's extremes:

Thompson is keenly aware of the risk of trying to pull off a '60's style drug trip in this city. The Nevada billboard at the edge of town warns of 20 years for possession of marijuana, or life in prison for selling it... Thompson tells the reader that he doesn't expect any mercy as a "criminal freak" on The Strip. He compares Las Vegas

to the Army: “the shark ethic prevails – eat the wounded.” In a closed society where everybody’s guilty, the only crime is getting caught. In a world of thieves, the only final sin is stupidity. (MacFarlane 179)

Thompson saw Las Vegas as a land of contradictions – filled with sex, gambling, and every other kind of vice known to mankind, but it also represented a place of tight order, stiff laws, and unforgiving justice. Considering its beginnings as a toy city the Mafia made, it had come a long way. In fact, Thompson saw the Las Vegas of the turbulent sixties and seventies as a kind of American microcosm. All the struggles, hopes, dreams, and failures of America could be found there, and it served as the perfect backdrop for a wide-ranging piece of Socio-Political satire, which is the core concept behind *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Where Winterowd sees crude language, meticulous catalogues of amounts and varieties of drugs consumed, and other generally anti-social behaviors and nothing more, deeper analysis reveals that all of these elements represent a condemnation of the “Drug Culture” of the Sixties, and expose many of the flaws that existed in America at that time. America struggled in the process of moving beyond the events of the last decade, but certain groups could not make this transition, and they still held onto outdated ideas and beliefs, stuck in an era that was already being pushed into memory. Raoul and Dr. Gonzo represented a pair of such people, old-time drug aficionados that had not let go of their obsessions, despite knowing that their time had ended.

The opening of the novel immediately sets the tone and scope of everything that follows it, establishing how the main characters act in relation to their world:

We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like “I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you

should drive...” And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles and hour with the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice screaming: “Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?” (3)

From the beginning the two main characters are already in an altered mental state, driving far too fast down the interstate towards Las Vegas to report on the Mint 400 race. Though this serves as their primary reason for going, the true journey departs from that linear goal and moves in unpredictable lines after they arrive. The reason behind this extreme situation is part of the Gonzo experience, and not a word-for-word account of Thompson’s activities in Vegas, as critics like Winterowd have interpreted. Thompson knew all about the realities of the drug culture, and exposing this to his readership serves as one of the basic points of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

The axis of the novel is formed by the two primary characters, Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo, and everything rotates around them. However, as the author’s direct persona, Raoul exists as the most important character in the novel, a figure who could do things, say things, and ingest things that no real person could possibly do without being arrested, assaulted, or killed. Thompson said Raoul “had to be just hazy enough so I can let him say and do things that wouldn’t work in first person” (Weingarten 237), and that sense of haziness, the altered-state provided by the many mind-twisting chemicals he took, acts to filter the lens through which he perceives the world.

Stull’s concept of Thompson and his culturally alien alter-ego continues with Raoul’s attorney “Dr. Gonzo,” who acts as an even more unreliable character than Duke, unlike in “the Kentucky Derby” where Steadman acted as the more reliable character. The characters’

relationship behaves like a tilted axis, and the interactions between the two in the novel illustrate the balance in their relationship; when one character begins to go out of control, the other pulls him back, restoring mutual stability. If the one attempts to act without the other, the results would prove disastrous. If Thompson/Raoul exists as a “marginal character” as Stull said, then Dr. Gonzo, despite his own character flaws, acts to hold him in place, allowing both to function in a world that no longer accepts them.

Either way these characters move in an eccentric orbit through the story, sometimes picking up other people along the way. The first example of this is “the kid” they pick up on the trip down to Las Vegas. While they sped along at a hundred miles an hour, high on mescaline and amyls, simultaneously listening to hippie stoner music on the radio countered by a *Rolling Stones* tape playing “Sympathy for the Devil,” Dr. Gonzo notices the kid hitchhiking by the side of the road (4-5). The kid represents basic innocent youth, an unassuming figure who suddenly and unfortunately finds himself sucked into this drug-soaked maelstrom contained within a huge, red Chevy Convertible, containing a pair of figures more demented than any he had ever encountered before. This acts as an example of the seventies generation coming into contact with the acid-head generation of the sixties, and the former would ultimately prove to reject the later, indicating how times had changed, and how some – such as Raoul and Dr. Gonzo – could not adjust to the new era that no longer had a place for their kind.

The kid’s experience with the pair worsened quickly once it became clear that the pair could not hold onto their senses amid the drug haze, and then they started spouting nonsense and grotesque stories. Once Dr. Gonzo and Raoul began a fictional story to get a rise from the kid, about how they were going to kill a drug dealer named Savage Henry and eat his



lungs while laughing hysterically, the kid bolted from the car and ran back towards where he first joined up with them. Wherever the road took Raoul and Dr. Gonzo, and whatever they aimed to do once there, it wouldn't be to his benefit, so the kid took the first good opportunity and removed himself from the scene (19). In this way the youth of the new generation, represented by the kid, literally ran screaming from the old generation without even turning to look back.

Just as the trickster comparisons were made earlier with "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," that sense seems even stronger here as the pair of miscreants continue to provoke and upset the established order of things as they pass. Also in terms of Harred's carnivalesque interpretation, these agents of chaos actively oppose the normal societal constraints of the culture they act in by openly flaunting their impaired state, seeming to invite reprisal from the cultural majority. The strongest example of the characters' mischief-making desires occur when they decide to bait the lion in its den – by attending the National District Attorney's Conference on Narcotics, while completely stoned (Stull 158-159):

Our very presence would be an outrage. We would be attending the conference under false pretenses and dealing, from the start, with a crowd that was convened for the stated purpose of putting people like us in jail. We were the Menace – not in disguise, but stone-obvious drug abusers, with a flagrantly cranked-up act that we intended to push all the way to the limit... (Thompson 109)

Yet while they exist in a constant state of paranoid awareness, fearful of finally being caught by the authorities, they never stop consuming their drugs and the officers and attorneys at the conference never appear to notice. The sense of the ironic serves as another major force in

the novel, best exemplified by Raoul's presence at, and his commentary concerning, the narcotics convention:

It was easy enough to sit there with a head full of mescaline and listen to hour after hour of irrelevant gibberish... There was certainly no risk involved. These poor bastards didn't know mescaline from macaroni... I suspect we could have done the whole thing on acid... except for some of the people there... The sight of a 344-pound police officer from Waco, Texas, necking openly with his 290-pound wife (or whatever woman he had with him) when the lights were turned off for a Dope Film was just barely tolerable on mescaline – which is mainly a sensual/surface drug that exaggerates reality... but with a head full of acid, the sight of two fantastically obese human beings far gone in a public grope while a thousand cops all around them watched a movie about the 'dangers of marijuana' would not be emotionally acceptable. The brain would reject it: The medulla would attempt to close itself off from the signals it was getting from the frontal lobes... and the middle-brain, meanwhile, would be trying desperately to put a different interpretation on the scene, before passing it back to the medulla at the risk of physical action. (143-144)

As with the situation between Thompson and Jimbo from the Derby article, Thompson once again inverts high and low as Raoul demonstrates how much more he understands about drugs and how they affect neurophysiology and psychology than any of the officers around him, attempting to learn about the threat drugs and the drug culture represented from each other's non-existent experience. Never mind the fact that two informal representatives of that culture sat among them, and they never noticed any of the signs.

Much as with the situation with the kid early on, illustrating the incompatibility of the new generation and the old, the officers belong to the same generation as Raoul and Dr. Gonzo, attempting to fight a battle that, in Raoul's mind, no longer exists in the way the officers imagine. Raoul acknowledges he and his compatriot belong to a bygone era, but they can't let go of their past. Meanwhile law enforcement, which Thompson indicates was notably slow in catching up with the times (also a point made in *Hell's Angels*), spend their time training up to do battle in the street with an army of screaming pot heads and acid freaks, but the battle never happened. In fact, Raoul indicates that at the time drugs like heroin and cocaine attracted far more attention from the present generation, and if a drug war occurred, these drugs would represent the most serious threat. In essence, the police prepared to fight a battle on the wrong field. The drug fiends in the classic style of Raoul and Dr. Gonzo, the Keysian acid-head beatnik types, were a dying breed, kept in their habits by dealers "as a favor to special customers: mainly jaded, over-thirty drug dilettantes – like me and my attorney" (201). Raoul and his attorney, just like the officers, could not move with the times, unable to adjust to the changes occurring around them.

As the story winds down, Raoul reflects on his time in Las Vegas, and about everything he saw and learned from the experience. Unsurprisingly none of it appeared positive. From his commentary earlier in the novel about John Lennon's latest political song, "Power to the People," being "ten years too late" (21), to his analyses of the war reports coming out of Vietnam, the rumors of political corruption in Nixon's administration, and the "War on Drugs," initiated by Nixon in 1969 (Payan 23), it all seemed wasteful. A waste of time, energy, and effort, and one last time Raoul returns to the event that set the tone for his entire sojourn in Las Vegas, the NDAA Narcotics Conference:

It had been a waste of time, a lame fuckaround that was only – in clear retrospect – a cheap excuse for a thousand cops to spend a few days in Las Vegas and lay the bill on the taxpayers. Nobody had *learned* anything – or at least nothing new. Except maybe me... and all I learned was the National District Attorneys' Association is about ten years behind the grim truth and harsh kinetic realities of what they have only just recently learned to call “the Drug Culture” in this foul year of Our Lord 1971. (201)

Once again Thompson draws attention to a specific window of time; ten years. Everything in America had changed drastically in those ten years, but some people – the officers at the conference, John Lennon and his music, and Raoul and Dr. Gonzo's attachment to their hipster lifestyle –all belonged to a time left behind. Even the image of Las Vegas had changed in that time, from its roots as a hotbed of organized crime and unrestricted capitalism to a tightly controlled and regulated city – that it exists, in fact, as “the Establishment” that the counterculture spent all its time rebelling against (Banco 132). The key to understanding what all this means in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, according to Lindsey Michael Banco, is the realization that Raoul's search for the American Dream in Las Vegas is itself a joke, and that he operates as a kind of “anti-tourist” (133).

Las Vegas, and the image America held of it as a place of endless opportunity, glamour, wealth, and freedom, was an illusion that middle-America bought into, and tourists flocked to it in search of the American Dream. In Banco's analysis Raoul Duke then acts as the anti-tourist, exposing the lies that these middle-class tourists bought into. The people that came to find their dream in Vegas ended up only making beasts of themselves, as with the officers at the convention. When they believe they found the American Dream at last after receiving directions from the manager of a taco stand to go to a place called “The

Psychiatrist's Club" where all the trash and villains of Las Vegas went, the pair found nothing but "a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds... burned down three years ago" (168). The year it burned down, 1968, signaled a time of ideological death for Thompson, and none of the cheap illusions of success or progress Las Vegas offered could fill that gap. The entire presence of Las Vegas within present American society seemed to signal the death knell for the idealists of Thompson's era, and Raoul's speech at the end of chapter eight signals it:

And that, I think, was the handle - that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of old and evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply prevail. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave. So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look west, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark - that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (68)

Las Vegas serves as the metaphorical line in the sand, a place where progress approached, and then rolled away like a tide. Thompson thus attempts to dispel the illusion of the American Dream that Las Vegas, as an agent of established order, tries to create, which serves as nothing more than a trap meant to distract people from reality. The trauma of the experience leaves Raoul with more questions than answers, and the same applies to everyone who seeks an ideal – if the American Dream was so easy to locate, everyone could take advantage of it. The quest from its beginning proved absurd, as it could not yield a definitive answer and the reality of this, though depressing in many ways, requires a certain sense of humor to digest the situation properly. Thompson therefore embraced satire as the means to communicate these complex ideas, leaving the conclusions open-ended to provoke thought.

In Vwadek P. Marciniak's book *Politics, Humor, and the Counterculture*, he outlines this questioning of the real and reality, and the use of socio-political satire as the basis for many sixties countercultural writers' humorous writings concerning their tumultuous era. This same principle, he notes, does not apply to 1960's countercultural writers alone, but to all cultural movements that existed in opposition to their cultural majority (13). Marciniak connects the use of humor in conjunction with social commentary as a highly effective means for marginalized groups or individuals to express their ideas with humor, acting as a buffer against the harsher realities of their commentaries. However, their use of humor to attract attention to serious subjects may cause confusion, or misunderstanding, as with Jonathan Swift. When his ironic statements were misinterpreted as serious commentary in *A Modest Proposal*, the reactions he received proved to him that many could not comprehend the satirical mode of thinking. For Marciniak the humorists, like Geoffrey Chaucer, Jonathan Swift, Tom Wolfe, Stanley Kubrick, and Samuel Clemens for example, serve as important sources of social analysis:

The great humorists can smell cultural changes (unlike comics or jokesters, politicians or CEOs) for humorists are among those rare breeds of artists who are also visionaries. Humor sits on the shoulders of insight. These are the voices of substance rather than those of the pratfall or quick joke. (13)

Hunter S. Thompson also belongs to the same tradition, his humor often misunderstood as Swift's was, because he also wrote with a powerful sense of the ironic. Carnival in the tradition of Rabelais operated on the same basis – the grotesque, the abnormal, caricature and exaggeration, all necessary to invert humanity's view of itself, to step away from what humanity perceives as reality in order to observe it from a different angle. This has always

served as the basis of satire, and Thompson's personae, such as Raoul Duke and his attorney, act as the primary devices for carrying readers outside of the normal view of the world and into a twisted mirror image. Thompson in his role as an anti-authoritarian satirist uses this technique to encourage others to question the ultimate authority of human perception; that reality is always subject to the personal filters of belief and ideology. However, since both of Thompson's main characters prove thoroughly unreliable by their very natures the reader must construct their own reality in the text, to use their own judgment and intelligence to find the truth. Only when a person can find this truth for themselves can they feel independent and self-reliant.

Thompson focused on the concepts of individuality and freedom throughout his life, and this served as his reason to pursue journalism in the first place, since the journalist seeks to protect the rights of citizens by revealing the truth and offering the information people need to protect their rights. As a humorist Thompson combined this journalistic impulse with a satirical edge in order to cope with the absurdities he saw in the real world. Thus the humorist, according to Marciniak, must draw a line between perceived reality and what is real:

Individuality for most – like the implications of freedom – is a burden: the slogan for so many could be “give me certainty or give me death.” This, however, would raise the question of what could be the difference?

The *real* which is always of its own, can be considered as a fixed point or a collection of fixed points or objects. The *real* has a certain sense of permanence, stability and immutability. *Reality*, on the other hand, confronts the process of phenomenological living more than any description can adequately demonstrate since

it is more of a commitment to an active sense of space and of time, a process or movement rather than an object one might momentarily focus upon... In the end, of course, we live and are living and so both the real and reality apply. The importance is the balance and where the balance resides. (15)

The purpose of altering the perception of reality lies within the domain of persuasive communication. Satire, as one form of persuasive communication, encourages people to observe a topic from a different point of view, appealing to their sense of humor by looking at a situation from a perspective they may not have considered before. Other forms include propaganda, which seek to alter the perceptions of others by instilling the desired worldview of its creators and what they believe constitutes the truth. Thompson was critical of the modern media for sometimes falling into the trap of spreading propaganda on behalf of those in power (as with the Lynch report in *Hell's Angels*, or the misguided information the officers drew upon in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*), and so in his satires he sought to alter the readers' perceptions by observing reality through the altered eyes and minds of characters who operate beyond normal society; Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo for instance.

As with strict reporting, satire also seeks to protect the truth by offering a varying point of view for readers to analyze the subject. The impetus for writing it in the first place exists due to the author's sense of loyalty to those he seeks to reach, and in the case of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson draws attention to figures in authority and sources in the media who spread disinformation, knowingly or unknowingly. By natural extension this information and its sources must undergo proper scrutiny before they can be accepted as fact. As a singular source addressing the subject on behalf of no one beyond the self, the author can express his opinions in order to serve as an independent monitor of power. Also by



adopting the fictional persona of Raoul Duke, Thompson crafts a story that allows him to offer personal opinion through a representative in the story, thus granting him a sense of independence from the subject itself. When the story is properly interpreted as a source of satirical commentary and not as a true-to-life representation of deviant behavior then a public forum for discussion can be opened. The humor allows the story to connect with readers on a lighter note, and the manner in which the story approaches the subject matter grants it relevance when analyzed beyond the humorous level. The issues Thompson addresses (independence, freedom, and truth) are universal human concepts, tied neither to a time nor to a place, and when these issues are considered within the context of Dr. Johnson's quote that opened the novel, when man willingly makes a beast of himself to relieve the pain of his existence he makes himself vulnerable to the will of others. He surrenders the free will that humanity holds dear, and loses the ability to recognize the difference between fantasy and reality. In order to protect the rights of a free people in a democracy, the people require accurate information in order to counter others' attempts to subvert their wills with deception. This applies to life in general as well, but holds a place of special importance when it comes to politics. Thompson once more returned to his literary journalism roots in order to cover the pivotal 1972 presidential campaign. He set off on a journey one more time, seeking something arguably harder to find than the American Dream itself – an honest politician. However, before people could even hope to find an honest politician, they first had to discover honesty itself – the simple search for truth made complicated by those controlling the flow and nature of information.

## Chapter 5: Question Everything – Thompson’s Brutal Analysis of the 1972 Presidential Campaign.

The last of Thompson’s texts that I will analyze may be his most important, as it dealt with one of the most sensitive presidential elections in many years – an election that might swing away from the incumbent administration based upon a massive increase in voter numbers, due to both a reduction in voting age, and the all-encompassing issue of the decaying situation in Vietnam. *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72*, composed of the monthly dispatches sent by Hunter S. Thompson to *Rolling Stone Magazine* as he followed the Democratic effort to oust Richard Nixon from the White House, served as his forum to expose the absurdities he found in the American political process. It represented Thompson’s first journalistic work written from the beginning in his Gonzo style, combining the skills he used as a journalist in *Hell’s Angels* with the strange and highly subjective first-person style he developed in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In this election, when it seemed that the fate of the nation hung in the balance, Thompson began a new journey – to find an honest politician. In *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* he had to do more than focus on the failings of one particular aspect of society (such as the highly insular Derby society or the illusion of Las Vegas as the home of the American dream); he had to expose the lies, deceptions, and failures in both the presidential campaign process and in the *reporting* of the campaign, which Thompson saw as horribly flawed and skewed, out of line with the core intent of journalism rule number one – to find and report the truth.

One aspect of political journalism that Thompson knew needed change was the accessibility of reports to the general public, especially the new voters who would be coming

to the polling stations for the first time. Much of what he saw produced by veteran political journalists was almost incomprehensible to anyone that was not already deep into politics. In his introduction to *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* Thompson addressed this problem before delving into his subject matter:

Politics has its own language, which is often so complex that it borders on being a code, and the main trick in political journalism is learning how to translate – to make sense of the partisan bullshit that even your friends will lay on you – without crippling your access to the kind of information that allows you to keep functioning.

(17)

Right away Thompson mentions the need to have access to information, and that this information must exclude partisan intent – a key element in Kovach and Rosenstiel's nine principles of journalism, since a free society runs on information and communication. The source of the partisanship Thompson saw in a great deal of contemporary political journalism he attributed to the influence many politicians had over long-time journalists – that their “clubby/cock-tail personal relationships” (18) had weakened their ethical standing when it came to reporting facts. Therefore Thompson declared that nothing in his reportage would exist “off the record,” a dangerous line journalists often had to draw in order to keep some sources on board with them. Unsurprisingly the stance that Thompson adopted made him anathema to many potential political sources.

This sense of exclusion by many politicians seemed to limit his access to issues behind the campaigns, but it allowed him a unique sense of freedom when it came to analyzing people. Thompson focuses a great deal of attention on people – the candidates themselves, as well as those on their staffs. The reason he focuses on the people more than the issues, even

important issues concerning the nation which should logically hold precedence over personal character, resulted from his knowledge of what voters focus on the most - personalities.

Phillip Seib explains this phenomenon in his book *Campaigns and Conscience: the Ethics of Political Journalism*:

Too much emphasis on issues is boring; *people* are more interesting than issues.

Particularly in presidential elections, many Americans cast their votes based on their evaluation of the person rather than because of loyalty to a particular party or issues position. In part, this is a product of voter reliance on television, which brings the candidates into our living rooms, where we can give them the once-over as they amiably try to convince us that they're fine folk.

Survey research from the 1984 presidential campaign found that solid majorities of voters agreed with Walter Mondale rather than Ronald Reagan about issues such as deficit reduction and aid to the Nicaraguan Contras. But when asked whom they wanted to be president, they overwhelmingly said "Reagan." While not particularly caring for some of his issues positions, they liked *him*. (41-42)

In this race Thompson realized that while many important issues weighed on the nation, the most obvious being the declining situation in Vietnam and the continuing opposition to the draft, the first thing required of any Democratic Party candidate was a sense of bearing that would convince the people that he or she could handle the job better than the incumbent.

Thompson's view of modern politics and everything that was wrong with it ultimately wrapped around President Richard M. Nixon. Thompson had always been an opponent of Nixon and never hid the fact. Thompson showed no favoritism towards the stable of Democratic Party hopefuls either, and in the opening days of the campaign one of his first

goals concerned an analysis of the candidates – to study their personalities and how they matched up against Nixon. The *next* hurdle they would have to clear with voters laid with the issues themselves. If they couldn't pass the first one – and Thompson indicates it was a rather *low* hurdle given the competition – then nothing would change, and Nixon would ascend to the top once again.

However, the audience for Thompson's report had a definite focus on a demographic that at first the political wizards considered largely unimportant; young voters. From the very conception of this project both Thompson and *Rolling Stone Magazine* co-founder Jann Wenner saw an opportunity to reach a new audience – the youthful rock-and-roll culture – with a fresh new take on political observation, one that would give them an insight into politics without being needlessly esoteric (Weingarten 253). Thompson, through his reputation as a rebel and an outsider among the younger demographic, had a better chance at reaching these younger voters. Thompson felt that they needed to understand the American political process better, and why their voices could decide the outcome of the campaign. To do this though they needed information free of political jargon, and so his reports always kept an eye focused on aspects of the campaign process that young people needed to become familiar with in order to demonstrate that they understood their nation's system and their responsibilities as citizens. Once informed, the decision to become involved would ultimately lie with them.

Like the Presidential campaigns of 2004 and 2008, the 1972 election buzzed with the potential influence of "the youth vote," largely disregarded in the past due to prejudice against what the older generation saw as the limited civic-mindedness of the younger demographic. "These kids are turned off from politics, they say. Most of 'em don't even want

to hear about it. All they want to do these days is lie around on their waterbeds and smoke that goddamn marrywanna... yeah, and just between you and me, Fred, I think it's for the best" (Thompson 40-41). Based on past data and present trends, the media elite in Washington expected only about ten percent of this age demographic to vote. Therefore the campaigns would pay lip service to this demographic while actively focusing their energies on the more mature voting blocs.

Throughout his reports, Thompson indicated a nationwide sense of apathy, of total political and social exhaustion, and not just with younger voters. Little enthusiasm surrounded this election, despite the fact that it could result in four more years of a profoundly unpopular administration:

The only people who seem genuinely interested in the '72 elections are the actual participants – the various candidates, their paid staff people, the thousands of journalists, cameramen & other media connected hustlers who will spend most of this year humping the campaign along... and of course all the *sponsors*, called "fat cats" in the language of Now-Politics. (42)

For Thompson this would serve as the root problem in his later reports when he analyzed media involvement in the campaign. The campaign process had become incredibly insular by necessity, since public interest contributed little to no motivational energy for it to feed on, so this energy needed to come from other sources. This is where the media comes into play, and its role in the '72 election would prove to be significant, perhaps disproportionately so, compared to previous elections. This campaign appeared to hinge less upon uniting behind particular issues, and more to do with embracing the candidate with the strongest cult of

personality. Therefore Thompson would also focus on the candidates' characteristics – but usually not from a positive perspective.

The first sample of personal characterization Thompson focuses on in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* centers on a figure that tied his own memory back to the painful Democratic National Convention in 1968, when Chicago police under the direct order of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley used extreme force against war protestors. The violence eventually spilled over to non-protestors, including several media figures, Thompson being among them (46). The candidate Thompson indicated who suffered the most during the riots, Eugene McCarthy, would attempt to run once again in '72, this time perhaps with revenge against political opponents from '68 on his mind. However when Thompson analyzes his character, McCarthy appears to seriously stumble against the first political hurdle of personal likeability:

I recall standing next to him [McCarthy] in the snow outside the “exit” door of a shoe factory in Manchester, New Hampshire, in February of 1968 when the five o'clock whistle blew and he had to stand there in the midst of those workers rushing out to the parking lot. I will never forget the pain in McCarthy's face as he stood there with his hand out, saying over and over again: “Shake hands with Senator McCarthy...” a tense plastic smile on his face, stepping nervously toward anything friendly... but most of the crowd ignored him... There was one network TV camera on hand that afternoon, but the scene was never aired. It was painful enough, just being there, but to have put that scene on national TV would have been an act of genuine cruelty. McCarthy was obviously suffering; not so much because nine out of ten people

refused to shake his hand, but because he really hated being there in the first place...

(43)

Thompson's characterization of McCarthy from that memory, to his jarring comments towards other Democratic hopefuls (particularly Senator Ed Muskie, the de facto Democratic front runner at that early stage of the campaign) revealed a man whose entire being screamed *phony*. His tense, plastic smile, nervous demeanor, and the general air of disingenuous spirit he exuded made him a very poor contender for the highest seat in the land as Thompson saw it. Thompson needed to scrutinize these candidates' personalities as surely as their policies for his audience, the supposedly inconsequential youth voters, who needed to understand the people involved in the process on a humanistic level before they could confront them on an issues-based level.

Much of Thompson's early campaign analysis reveals this youth-centered focus, explaining in detail just *how* the process works, how to understand the impetus behind the political decision-making process, and how to evaluate their leaders' potential to do the necessary work of leading the nation. In this way *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* acts as an introductory lesson to national politics. An example of this principle comes early on as Thompson dissects the nature of "playing the odds" when it comes to the political process, and in particular how it applies to the youth demographic at the time:

The odd truth that almost everybody... who is paid to analyze & predict the behavior of Vote Blocs seems to feel that the much-publicized "youth vote" will not be a Major Factor in '72... would be a lot easier to accept if it wasn't for the figures. What the experts appear to be saying is that the sudden addition of 25 million new voters between the ages of 18 and 25 will not make much of a difference in the power-



structure of American politics... in a close election even ten percent of that number would mean 2.5 million votes – a very serious figure when you stack it up against Nixon’s thin margin of victory over Humphrey in 1968. (48)

Thompson attempted to show the young readers of *Rolling Stone* just how little the politicians regarded their demographic, now greatly expanded over the last election due to the passing of the Twenty-sixth amendment in July 1971, when the official voting age was lowered from twenty-one to eighteen. This was a serious oversight in Thompson’s opinion, disregarding the addition of that many new voters, and a factor that could definitely affect the outcome – but these young voters needed to know *why* it would and what it would take to make their votes count.

The second major candidate profile Thompson offers focuses on then front-runner Senator Ed Muskie. Thompson first profiles Muskie through commentary from a source he met by chance on a flight, “the ‘legendary trial lawyer’... and owner of the Washington Redskins, Edward Bennett Williams” (55):

“He’s honest, I respect the guy.” Then he stabbed the padded seat arm between us two or three times with his forefinger. “But the *main* reason I’m working for him,” he said, “is that he’s the only guy we have who can beat Nixon... That’s the real issue this time,” he said. “Beating Nixon. It’s hard to even guess how much damage those bastards will do if they get in for another four years.” (55)

Thompson had heard the same argument before, and said he had even made a similar case a few times before, about how Nixon needed to be ousted at all costs. The trouble he saw with this situation as Williams described it was one as old as politics itself – having to choose

between the lesser of two evils rather than voting for something or someone based on what really matters – personal ethics, beliefs, and values.

In addition to analyzing McCarthy and Muskie at some length, Thompson then briefly introduces the other major players, in generally vulgar and unflattering terms:

Muskie is a bonehead who steals his best lines from old Nixon speeches. McGovern is doomed because everybody that knows him has so much respect for the man that they can't bring themselves to degrade the poor bastard by making him run for President... John Lindsay is a dunce, Gene McCarthy is crazy, Humphrey is doomed and useless, Jackson should have stayed in bed... and, well, that just about wraps up the trip, right? (57)

The point about Senator George McGovern indicates his personal respect for him, which becomes important when evaluating Thompson's coverage of the McGovern campaign later, invoking thoughts of Stull and his analysis of Thompson as a "marginal character," often influenced by the people around him.

From the mid-point of the February section of *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, Thompson moves closer and closer into the McGovern camp, especially after McGovern's surprising win in the New Hampshire caucus. He garnered sixty-two percent of the vote, clearly beating McCarthy, as did surprise candidate Shirley Chisholm (66-68). The reason for this has to do with the voter demographic that McGovern had assembled, the composition of which Thompson notes included people under twenty and over forty, with few in between those ages (67). Unlike campaigns of the other candidates, McGovern made a genuine attempt to reach for the young voters that Thompson earlier indicated went largely ignored. By drawing on the "massive, frustrated energies of a mainly young, disillusioned

electorate that has long since abandoned the idea that we all have a *duty* to vote,” (73)

Thompson indicates McGovern, as well as Chisholm, drew on a source of power the political wizards and journalists ignored or discounted.

However, Thompson, while appearing to admire and even endorse McGovern, does not go so far as to make a pitch to the reader. Undoubtedly the different tack that McGovern took with his campaign appeared to represent a refreshing change for the cynical Thompson. However, since his mission remained a journalistic search for truth, no matter how unpleasant, he had to look at the underside of the issues. What he saw worried him:

McGovern is not one of your classic fireballs on the stump. His campaign workers in New Hampshire seem vaguely afflicted by a sense of uncertainty about what it all means. They are very *decent* people. They are working hard, they are very sincere... but they *lack* something crucial, and that lack is painfully obvious to anybody who remembers the mood of the McCarthy volunteers in 1968. (74)

The lack Thompson indicates concerns a sense of unity. A combination of factors in McCarthy's campaign in 1968 led to a coalition of workers who united for the wrong reasons. “Those people were angry,” Thompson said of the '68 McCarthy workers, noting that McGovern's campaign so far had weeded out that element, which came back to haunt McCarthy later. From that point on Thompson paid very specific attention to the people the candidates surrounded themselves with – a tip to the young readers to look beyond just the figurehead of a campaign, but also to scrutinize the people the candidates surrounded themselves with.

Thompson immediately follows this with a clear example from McGovern's political team – namely McGovern's national press leader, Joe Granmaison:

Granmaison was eager to nail Muskie: “If we elect a President who three years ago said, ‘Gee, I made a mistake’ ... well, I think it’s about time these people were held *accountable* for those mistakes.”

Indeed. But Granmaison backed away from me like he’d stepped on a rattlesnake when I asked him if it were true that he’d been a *Johnson delegate* to the Chicago convention in ’68.

“Let’s talk about this word ‘*accountable*,’ I said. “I get the feeling you stepped in shit on that one.”

“What do you mean?” he snapped. “Just because I was a Johnson delegate doesn’t mean anything. *I’m* not running for office.” (75)

Thompson draws out this example as a basic lesson on political analysis rule number one – how to detect hypocrisy. Thompson saw a great deal of infighting among the Democrats, and the major battlefield of the day was the Vietnam issue. Who voted for it, and who against? What candidates declared a willingness to offer amnesty to conscientious objectors? Who seemed to flip-flop on the issues since the last election? Where these weaknesses occurred, people like Granmaison would use them as ammunition against their political opponents, all the while they were also in the same group as their current opponents during the previous election. However, since *Granmaison* was not a candidate, his change of stance was irrelevant, or so he thought. Thompson warns his audience about blindly falling into the trap of the double-standard.

As Thompson’s observation of the candidates and the campaign process continued his tone towards the whole American political scene shifted, from a somewhat amused sense of cynicism to a darkly pessimistic view of America’s immediate future. The individual flaws in

the candidates' campaigns began to appear more connected to a general, shared sickness in the Democratic Party itself. The major issue for Thompson revolved around the fact that while Nixon's administration had done more harm than good, the chance that his opponents represented a definite improvement looked less and less likely:

How long, O Lord... How long? Where will it end? The only possible good that can come of this wretched campaign is the ever-increasing likelihood that it will cause the Democratic Party to self-destruct.

A lot of people are seriously worried about this, but I am not one of them. I have never been much of a Party Man myself... and the more I learn about the realities of national politics, the more I'm convinced that the Democratic Party is an atavistic endeavor – more an Obstacle than a Vehicle – and that there is really no hope of accomplishing anything genuinely new or different in American politics until the Democratic Party is done away with... it is a bogus alternative to the politics of Nixon. (125)

What he learned himself, and passed onto his readers, was a view of a party in disarray. The core of the party in the form of politicians like Senator Ed Muskie, Senator Gene McCarthy, Former Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, and others appeared no different from their opponents. Another symptom of this problem arose from the victory of Alabama Governor George Wallace in the Florida primaries, and how Thompson viewed it at the time as a blow against any societal progression America had made after the racial strife of the sixties (129).

When looking at the trends developing through Thompson's reports in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, his writing from the campaign trail proved quite different in terms of its energy, pacing, and basic style from prior Gonzo works. For the first

time in his Gonzo writing Thompson did not use a side-kick alter-ego persona in his reports – no Ralph Steadman character or Dr. Gonzo to play against – because the kind of abstract inter-relationship that worked so well in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* or the prior Kentucky Derby article would not serve the same purpose in Thompson's political reports. The voice and style required for this demanded a readily accessible and understandable form to communicate these ideas to his primary audience.

The major exception to this in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* came during Thompson's March report on Muskie's "Sunshine Special" whistle-stop train tour through Florida. Thompson set up the situation where another person borrowed his press credentials to get on the train since Thompson missed his chance (intentionally left out by Muskie's managers he claimed). The person in question subsequently wrought chaos on the train when he got drunk and began harassing the other members of the press as well as the campaign staffers, and eventually Muskie himself during his final speech (106-107).

The exaggerated situation Thompson describes involved two of Muskie's critics harassing him during the end-cap of his tour. Their actions offered Thompson a natural opportunity to use his vulgar and highly exaggerative Gonzo style, as a means of highlighting the ridiculousness of the situation – that Muskie's piece de resistance, his climactic speech at the end of his trip, was rendered impotent when heckled by a pair of critics openly, and then he reacted to them in an uncharacteristically aggressive manner. Thompson then made the facetious claim that Muskie's angry, weepy behavior and total emotional breakdown occurred due to his dependence on a drug called Ibogaine, a psychedelic alkaloid native to West Africa (Kroupa and Wells 21-22). The claim's intent existed merely as a bit of Gonzo reality-bending satire, to explain away Muskie's self-destruction due to an addiction to a

mysterious drug. In the end the media, to Thompson's surprise, embraced the report as fact. Several conventional news outlets picked up the story and ran with it. Once more, Thompson reveals the necessity of thoroughly double-checking facts before the media reports on them; otherwise false information spreads (or in this case a joke becomes twisted), causing additional problems, which in this case led to a minor scandal for Muskie who had to defend against the erroneous claims.

From that point, Thompson's pace covering the campaign quickened as the campaign itself accelerated, leading to a moment which, for Thompson, encapsulated the futility of the entire Democratic political process, and further showed his readers just how fractured the Democratic Party had become. By April the process of dissolution began in earnest, and Thompson focuses his attention almost exclusively on the McGovern campaign, since it appeared to be close to clinching the Democratic nomination – completely baffling the political pundits whose claims appeared completely wrong.

The Democratic National Convention, held in Miami, signaled a time of great change as Thompson saw it. McGovern, the underdog, with his grassroots campaign, "one of the most impressive political organizations in the history of American politics" as Thompson said (169), had managed to secure the party nomination against all perceived odds. Thompson acknowledges that he and the other political journalists of the day couldn't believe it. However, because McGovern did precisely what Thompson said needed to be done at the very beginning of his campaign coverage – namely, embrace the young voters - McGovern did what Thompson himself attempted to do in his own political bid in 1970, when he ran for the position of Sheriff of Aspen; he got the young people out to vote, more than had ever voted before.

The situation at the convention appeared confused though, as Thompson saw more of the withering, self-destructive nature of the Democratic Party emerge. Blocs formed from McGovern's opponents, such as Humphrey, Muskie, McCarthy, Jackson, and Chisholm, sought to nullify his caucus votes in California, to prevent him from claiming the party nomination. This breach of political ethics as Thompson saw it could only lead to catastrophe:

What happened in Miami was far too serious for the kind of random indulgence that Gonzo Journalism needs. The Real Business happened, as usual, on secret-numbered telephones or behind closed doors blocked off by sullen guards. There were only two crucial moments in Miami – two potential emergencies that might have changed the outcome – and both of them were dealt with in strict privacy. (282)

Thompson acknowledged his free-wheeling approach to news coverage needed to take a backseat when it came to confronting a situation that seemed to fly directly in the face of the Democratic process. The secrecy of the entire situation, hidden from public view, appeared antithetical to Thompson's view of Democracy, especially with such an important election on the horizon. The "ABM movement" (Anybody But McGovern) had formed, as Thompson said, just a few days prior to the delegate voting at the convention, in a bid to keep McGovern from clinching the nomination. This highlighted one of Thompson's major concerns in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* – how the lust for control so often trumped political ethics and morality, to the point where America's alleged leaders opted to protect their own power rather than serve the public in the best manner possible:

It finally became clear that massive fraud, treachery, or violence was the only way to prevent McGovern from getting the nomination... and what followed... will



hopefully go down in history as one of the most shameful episodes in the history of the Democratic process. The ABM strategy was to hold McGovern under 1500 ballots for two votes... and then present a counter ABM candidate after that... and again if necessary... the name didn't matter. It didn't even make much of a difference if He, She, or It couldn't possibly beat Nixon in November... the only thing that mattered to the Meaney/Daley crowd was *keeping control of The Party*... this meant some nominee would have to be some loyal whore to Big Labor... somebody like Hubert Humphrey, or a hungry opportunist like Terry Sanford. (284)

Thompson's indictment of the Democratic Party's middle-conservative branch revealed some ugly truths to the readers of *Rolling Stone*, and to others who picked up his reports, as they had gone far beyond just the original rock-n-roll audience of *Rolling Stone*. It seemed an ugly, spiteful, almost infantile reaction to a Party outsider, a radical element that Democratic Party leaders feared would upset the balance of power within their Party. The Democratic majority even appeared willing to sacrifice the national election for the sake of maintaining their power within the party. Exposing this unethical conduct served as one of Thompson's chief concerns, and he articulated the problem surrounding this issue on such a personal level that it drew a considerable amount of attention from the major news media outlets of the time. In the end it did not affect the Party nomination, which McGovern won handily, surprising almost everyone involved.

After this resounding victory though, the tone of the campaign, and of Thompson's writing, turned darker. Senator Gary Hart, who served as McGovern's campaign manager during the '72 election, commented in an interview used in the 2008 documentary *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson*, on Thompson's indictment of the McGovern

campaign's blunders in the weeks after the convention's end, describing the venomous turn in his point-of-view as an infantile reaction to an unfortunate series of events that led to McGovern's embarrassing defeat at the hands of Nixon.

Hart is not altogether wrong. Thompson appears almost personally hurt or betrayed by the failure of the candidate he chose to back, lashing out at his failures, such as with the selection of Senator Thomas Eagleton as his Vice-Presidential candidate – who admitted after his selection to the media that he underwent shock therapy three times for mental depression (340-341). Thompson's problem with this did not concern Eagleton's need for controversial medical attention, but because in the world of politics such an admission acted to erode public confidence not just in Eagleton, but in McGovern for selecting him without knowing about the issue (338-339). The media's reaction and devotion to releasing *this news story* (as opposed to the Watergate situation, which was also breaking at the time, as McGovern recalled in an interview for the Gonzo documentary) only seemed to verify Thompson's cynical opinion on the nature of American politics and political journalism – how it all ended up as a kind of points game, gambling with the American dream. He sums up this dark analysis with a conversation he had with a local pimp in Miami, explaining to him the nature of the political wrangling going on behind the scenes:

The reason Nixon put Agnew and the Goldwater freaks in charge of the party this year is that he knows they can't win in '76 – but it was a good short-term trade; they have to stay with him this year, which will probably be worth a point or two in November – and that's important to Nixon, because he thinks it's going to be close: Fuck the polls. They always *follow* reality instead of predicting it... But the *real* reason he turned the party over to the Agnew/Goldwater wing is that he knows most

of the old-line Democrats who just got stomped by McGovern for the nomination wouldn't mind seeing George get taken out in '72 if they know they can get back in the saddle if they're willing to wait four years.

Bobo laughed, understanding it instantly. Pimps and hustlers have a fine instinct for politics. "What you're saying is that Nixon just cashed his whole check," he said. "He doesn't give a flying fuck what happens once he gets re-elected – because once he wins, it's all over for him anyway, right?" (341)

The conversation is fictionalized, like many similar situations in Thompson's other works when he needs to bounce an idea off of another character, another mind. Without his traveling companion persona in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* he commandeers another temporary persona – in this case, a pimp. This harkens back to Harred's concept of the carnivalesque in Thompson's Gonzo writing, where those on the outside of the power structure are able to see the big picture with shocking clarity. In this case, Thompson and the pimp, Bobo, discuss the nature of the American political power structure and the many angles politicians must consider when they formulate their strategies. As Thompson said, pimps and hustlers have a fine instinct for politics, because Thompson equates politicians' backroom strategizing and pro/con evaluations like gamblers do when they weigh the odds on a bet.

The inter-party decay Thompson noted earlier in his reports became reality, as the Democratic Party divided itself along sub-party lines, reducing their effectiveness as a united whole. McGovern, even among Democrats, was considered an outsider – "Radical freak" as Thompson called him on occasion early on. However, once it appeared that this outsider in the party had a chance at reaching the highest level of power in American society, those who

belonged to the majority in the Democratic sub-culture moved to protect their own power first. Thompson saw the Democratic Party's core (men like Hubert Humphrey, Richard Daley, Ed Muskie, and Henry Jackson) place their party above the greater good of the nation, all in a bid to maintain the status quo within their own ranks. Thompson pointed out before the odds had already been figured, weighed, and evaluated, and the Democrats would take the *next* election instead as consolation. The present problems the nation had – the *issues* that Thompson noted at the beginning, the war, the economy, and civil unrest – became sacrifices in order to protect the power structure and balance between the two major political parties.

In the waning weeks of the campaign, this sense of dark cynicism takes over Thompson's narrative. This change in tone and focus served Jann Wenner and *Rolling Stone's* desires – a developing report, showing the highs and lows of the political process from the point of view of a writer who had attracted a strong following among its most important readership demographic, the young. What Thompson saw reflected what many young people felt at the time – a profound sense of disappointment in the vaunted Democratic process. With the death of the campaign on the horizon, Thompson's remaining eighty or so pages seem to follow the Five Stages of Grief, first defined by psychologist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her 1969 study *On Death and Dying*; Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. After the Eagleton incident and the fallout from that, Thompson, like the rest of the media, recognized McGovern's campaign was dying. Eagleton served as the death blow, a coup de grace to McGovern's campaign, but Thompson didn't want to believe the end had already come. As Elisabeth Kubler-Ross notes, the length of time for each stage varies from person to person and often manifests in partial acceptance before turning to anger, and not everyone experiences the five stages of grief with the same intensity

or duration (32). When Thompson very quickly comes to grips with the death of the McGovern campaign in early September, he moves immediately from a frustrated understanding of what went wrong into a protracted period of anger by late September:

McGovern appeared to have a sure lock on the White House when the sun came up on Miami Beach on the morning of Thursday, July 13<sup>th</sup>. Since then he has crippled himself with a series of almost unbelievable blunders – Eagleton, Salinger, O’Brien, etc. – that have understandably convinced huge chunks of the electorate, including at least half of his own hard-core supporters, that The Candidate is a gibbering dingbat. His behavior since Miami has made a piecemeal mockery of everything he seemed to stand for during the primaries. (411)

The invectives Thompson once used on the old-line Democrats early in his reports now focused on the only remaining candidate he felt deserved his vote. The sense of personal betrayal and anger he experienced with the sudden turn of events in September in the excerpt above mirrors the reactions many feel when they lose someone close to them, but in this case Thompson’s anger lies not only with the candidate, McGovern’s team, or the party alone – he has once again seen the American dream die. The possibility that a new President would ascend to the highest office in the land and help heal the nation and end the war had died.

Thompson’s biographer Douglas Brinkley noted in the film *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson* that Thompson’s hopes for positive political change when the ’72 campaign opened had been thoroughly drained after the bloody events of the Sixties, when the only politicians he ever felt positive about, President John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, fell under the hate and bullets of assassins. The entire Democratic Party appeared to dive into free-fall during the doomed Democratic National Convention of 1968,

and the rise of Nixon only worsened America's situation in Vietnam, especially in regards to the expansion of the war into the borders of neighboring countries. When the McGovern campaign stumbled and fell only weeks after McGovern's nomination, it became too much for Thompson to bear emotionally and ideologically.

Once October began, leading to an election Thompson could no longer feel any enthusiasm for, his attention turned to the surreal nature of what he saw as inevitable – the re-election of Richard Milhous Nixon:

“Ominous” is not quite the right word for a situation where one of the most consistently unpopular politicians in American history suddenly skyrockets to Folk Hero status while his closest advisors are being caught daily in nazi-style gigs that would have embarrassed Martin Bormann. (417-418)

Thompson's references to the at-the-time rumor of Nixon's illegal activities at the Watergate Hotel circulated through media channels since late August, but they remained relegated to minor news status. However McGovern's own political pratfalls, as Senator McGovern himself noted during interviews for the *Gonzo* documentary, received considerably more attention than any of Nixon's shadowy machinations.

Thompson reacted to the surrealism of the situation America found itself in, with a choice between a “gibbering ding-bat” and “hypocrite” in McGovern, and a “Slimy, two-faced criminal” in Nixon, with a bout of pure Gonzo fabulism of his own, where he imagines a flashback that encapsulates all his previous experiences in a dream-like sequence:

Ah Jesus... here we go again; another flashback... the doctors say there's no cure for them; totally unpredictable, like summer lightning in the Rockies, or sharks on the Jersey shore... Yesterday I was sitting on my porch in Woody Creek, reading the

sports section of the *Denver Post*... when suddenly my head rolled back and my eyes glazed over and I felt myself sucked into an irresistible time-warp.

I was standing at the bar in the clubhouse at Churchill Downs on Derby Day with Ralph Steadman, and we were drinking Mint Juleps at a pretty good pace, watching the cream of Bluegrass Society getting drunker and drunker out in front of us... It was between races, as I recall: Ralph was sketching and I was making notes... We were standing there at the clubhouse bar, feeling very much on top of that boozy, back-slapping scene... when I suddenly glanced up from my notes & saw Frank Mankiewicz and Sonny Barger across the room, both of them wearing Hell's Angels costumes and both holding heavy chrome chain-whips... and yes, it was clear that they'd spotted us. Barger stared, not blinking, but Mankiewicz smiled his cold lizard's smile and the moved slowly through the drunken crowd to put themselves between us and the doorway. (420-421)

Thompson and Steadman make a run through the crowd, as other Hell's Angels Thompson recognized from his time among the gang fell into pursuit as well, charging through the drunken mass of humanity at the Kentucky Derby. At this point in Thompson's reporting he tried to make sense of the entire experience, the highs and lows, and when reality seemed incomprehensible he decided the best way to explain his feelings on the matter was through a dream-like flashback, combining everything from his career to date that filled him with fear and loathing. Sonny Barger, united with Frank Mankiewicz - the brutal, vicious Hell's Angel leader, and the slippery, lizard-like politician, but both recognizable in the dream as thugs in Thompson's mind by their common costumes - represented leading figures from two of his worst experiences.

They all converged in a place that Thompson associated with the unreal, Churchill Downs on Derby Day, when people changed into something bestial and uncontrolled, alcohol and loosened inhibitions erasing for a moment what made them respectable in the outside world. Now added to the drunken Kentucky elite, the Angels (Barger) and the politicians (Mankiewicz) chased after Thompson. He fled with Steadman through the crowds *towards* the Governor's box and the state troopers that guarded it, representing Thompson's last chance for aid, even though it appeared a brutal and vicious choice; but, like the election itself, he had to make a decision between the lesser of two evils and take the risk. The troopers would viciously and indiscriminately club anyone that "looked weird," as Thompson said, and in the frenzy they would club the thugs for them along with numerous innocent bystanders and haul them all away in paddy wagons, evoking memories of Thompson's time at the 1968 Democratic Convention. This fabulist construction became a hallmark of Thompson's Gonzo writing, as it illustrated the effects of stress, despair, and disappointment on the mind of someone actively trying to understand the world, and that more often than not it leads to mental collapse.

This leads to a trope Thompson utilized in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* – the nervous breakdown section, where the author appears so mentally broken and fragmented that a second person must record the author's thoughts and aid in making them sensible enough for others to read and understand. In both cases the fictional construct used shows a mind that has broken free from reality, and that while in this state the author comes to a true understanding, illustrating the movement from depression to acceptance.

Douglas Brinkley noted in the *Gonzo* documentary that Thompson's hope for America had been all but destroyed by the end of 1968, reflected by Duke and Dr. Gonzo's



discovery of the ruined “Psychiatrist’s Club” in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* – mentioned earlier as the American Dream’s grave. Therefore *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* ’72 represented an effort on Thompson’s part to try and understand what was happening to America one more time, now that the specter of the Sixties faded from the public consciousness, and a new decade and a new generation began. However, by the end of his journey on the campaign trail his fears had once again proven true – hope snatched away once again by human failure. When Thompson uses the psychological fragmentation trope, he demonstrates that only when the mind retreated as far away from reality as possible that what constituted the *real* could appear as anything resembling objectivity or truth. The mind had to exist outside of the reality being analyzed, just as those who stand outside of society can see aspects of it more clearly than those attempting to understand it from within the societal construct.

In this case it allowed Thompson the freedom to analyze the highs and lows of the McGovern campaign in particular and of the whole process in general with a feeling of disconnection from the situation, allowing him to recollect his composure. As he moved into the fifth stage of grief, acceptance, he calmly discussed the campaign’s self-destruction with his editor, acting as his second temporary alter-ego. This new alter-ego offers a reliable and logical mind for Thompson to balance his own thoughts against and allow him to perform a clear analysis. As Thompson and his editor discussed where McGovern went right – in presenting a “maverick” image that appealed to the right people, at the right place, at the right time, as with the Wisconsin primary (429), then where he went wrong, as with the Eagleton selection. In Thompson’s view, McGovern compromised his image as a maverick

and moved into a kind of political pragmatism, becoming everybody's friend, like a "used car salesman, sort of [talking] out of both sides of his mouth" (429).

*Perceptions* operate as the basis for politics, and Thompson revealed how these perceptions trumped the belief that issues drove the political process. Stull made the argument about how Thompson was concerned with how *reality* is formed by the subjective influence of personal ideology and point-of-view on what is *real*, and this point becomes clear in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*. No one can know the truth, what constitutes the real, because as human beings we have only our own minds to think with, and our own eyes to see with, and that anything that passes through our senses and thoughts automatically becomes shaped by personal subjectivity. Politicians know this very well, so most seek to shape others' perceptions of them. When things go horribly wrong, as they did for McGovern, when his follies ended in a lose/lose situation, the perceptions of the public are all that matter; whether they understand the whole truth of the situation or not.

When Thompson settled into full acceptance of the death of the Democratic effort in 1972, he could not help but notice that the ghost of the Sixties remained to haunt the beginning of the new decade. Everything seemed to revolve around the turmoil and issues of that era, and what Thompson saw in the election and from America boils down to two words; Reactionary exhaustion:

- (1) *Any* incumbent President is unbeatable, except in a time of mushrooming national crisis or a scandal so heinous – and with such obvious roots in the White House – as to pose a danger to the financial security and/or physical safety of millions of voters in every corner of the country.

(2) The “mood of the nation,” in 1972 was so overwhelmingly vengeful, greedy, bigoted, and blindly reactionary that no presidential candidate who even faintly reminded “typical voters” of the fear & anxiety of the 1960’s had any chance at all of beating Nixon last year – not even Ted Kennedy – because the pendulum “effect” that began with Nixon’s slim victory in ’68 was totally irreversible by 1972. After a decade of left-bent chaos, the Silent Majority was so deep in a behavioral sink that their only feeling for politics was a powerful sense of revulsion. All they wanted in the White House was a man who would leave them alone and do anything necessary to bring calmness back into their lives – even if it meant turning the whole state of Nevada into a concentration camp for hippies, niggers, dope fiends, do-gooders, and anyone else who might threaten the status quo. (467)

Point one never came to light prior to the election, even though the truth of the scandals would arise later, but the second point represents the core reason why the entire Democratic effort never stood a chance in 1972. The 1960’s once again presented an irresistible force, this time one that was detrimental to the Democratic Party. After a decade of post-war healing and social stagnation (the 1950’s) came a time of change, upheaval, and near-revolution (the 1960’s), but since people will always choose stability over ideology, the socio-political pendulum once more swung back towards the conservative. It was an unfortunate message that Thompson imparted, but one he could not avoid due to his nature as a journalist and not a propagandist. His belief in McGovern, as he explained, was necessary, because he could not cover a campaign if he didn’t care who won, just like watching a football game – you had to care about one of the teams at least to feel invested in it (496-

497). His intent from the beginning, as part of the great *Rolling Stone* political experiment, lay with the political education of the young, often first-time voters of America. Thompson did not know what would come at the end of the trail, but his duty as a journalist demanded that he make all his thoughts, feelings, and observations available to his readers.

Even those who ended up as targets for Thompson's criticism admitted that his take on the campaign process proved painfully accurate. For instance, George McGovern years afterward applauded Thompson's coverage of the campaign since "it was written as the campaign progressed, and not written in comfortable hind sight" (*Gonzo*); despite the fact that he didn't always like what Thompson had to say about him, McGovern recognized and respected Thompson for showing everything that happened as it happened, the good and the bad equally. When it came time to analyzing everything at the end his summary of facts seemed more credible *because* he involved himself in the stories themselves as they happened. He experienced it all, and he proved that he could analyze the race logically while he illustrated how the race affected him emotionally – it represented a very personal, human look at a campaign gone wrong. Mankiewicz, much maligned in the pages of *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, even commented during a film clip from *Breakfast with Hunter* used in the *Gonzo* documentary that Thompson's work "was the most accurate and least factual" analysis of the campaign. The combination of real-life facts proved less important when compared to the points and ideas Thompson raised about the nature of the politicians and the political process itself.

It seems a rather odd statement to make, but as James Stull stated in his thesis, it actually makes sense:

Thompson does not build his story, as do McPhee or Talese, on a series of referential facts – that house of card journalism in which one ‘erroneous’ fact may cause the whole structure to crack if not tumble. Thompson defamiliarizes, or estranges our understanding of conventional journalism and exposes the arbitrary means by which more orthodox journalists make sense of reality. He acknowledges the “fraudulent,” or fictive, nature of his enterprise, while the more conventional journalist refuses to recognize his arbitrary claims of objectivity. The subjective reality (or unreality) of Thompson’s world is, paradoxically, predicated on the unreliability of the participant-narrator... we can count on him to be as “truthful” as other ostensibly credible journalists. (Stull 162-163)

In other words, by approaching “truth” and “reality” from the opposite end of the journalistic spectrum, where truths and insights lie buried in a framework intentionally exaggerated, fictionalized, or altered in some way beyond reality allows for greater personal connection than journalism strictly constructed on a framework of hard facts. The latter possesses great strength because of its dedication to reality and truth, but this also makes it considerably more fragile due to the same factor that gives it credibility. A single flaw in the factual framework of hard journalism renders it useless. Meanwhile Gonzo journalism relies on abstractions and exaggerations in order to access the author’s message and intent, and it requires a level of active interpretation from the reader normally reserved for fiction in order to construct a whole picture, but the insights gained while doing so make the experience more engaging and satisfying. Jann Wenner recognized this fact when he brought Thompson to *Rolling Stone*, because he saw this writing strategy as the means to reach the modern generation of readers, and it did precisely that. It also produced a work of political journalism

that remains noteworthy for its insights into the Byzantine workings of the political process in America and the journalistic industry surrounding it, reaching far outside its original targeted readership group.

Each of Thompson's works, from *Hell's Angels* to *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, stand alone as important works of literature, individual reports on ideas and analyses of particular subjects that captured the attention of the nation when they were first published. However, their true value as examples of contemporary American literature, texts that continue to hold value to American culture long after their initial publication, requires their consideration as a contiguous story of America during the 1960's and 1970's. These early works paint a picture of a nation undergoing a painful change, and how during the chaos of this time America lost sight of its dream, the part of its grand ideology that made it a beacon of Democracy for the entire world. Thompson told the story of America during one of its most trying periods, but his writing transcended the barriers of historical recollection and journalistic reporting by offering a view of the world that proved both incisive and highly creative. The goal of the last part of this study lies in defining why Thompson's early works deserve greater literary attention while also confronting the question of why these works haven't seen a greater amount of close study. The answers to these questions lie within the tragedy of Thompson himself.

## Chapter 6: Fear and Loathing in American Literature and the Modern Literary Canon

In *Grub Street and the Ivory Tower*, Jeremy Treglown and Bridget Bennett seek to define literary journalism within the larger scope of the academic world. They state that “any journalism which can be thought of as having lasting value... with an emphasis on the vexed but at best mutually beneficial relationship between academic work... and a more public sphere” belongs in the blanket category of literary journalism (ix). As time has moved on since the New Journalism movement of the 1960’s writers such as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and Tom Wolfe have received their fair share of literary credit within academia. However, Hunter S. Thompson’s works, while popular within the public sphere, have not fared as well within academic circles.

The reasons for this, as I eluded to in the very beginning of my study, resulted from their connection to the mythos surrounding Thompson the man, which brought him both fame and ridicule in equal measure, to the point that Thompson’s literary persona overshadowed Thompson as a literary figure. One of Thompson’s greatest advantages in his time lay with his tremendous sense of timing and unique point-of-view. Douglas Brinkley commented that Thompson was “the right man, at the right place, at the right time” to tell the stories of the rise and fall of the Sixties and Seventies countercultural and political movements (*Gonzo*).

Unfortunately, the rising tide of literary criticism at the time did not appear to be compatible with Thompson’s style. One of the reasons for this appears to directly conflict with the beliefs of many current literary critical forms, as Harold Fromm states in his book *Academic Capitalism and Literary Value*: “dominant critical methodologies – particularly the structuralist, poststructuralist, reader-response, [and] deconstructive – reject the notion that

works of literature have a determinate or even determinable meaning” (17). He refers to the literary critical belief of excluding the author from his or her own text – a reaction to older forms of literary critical theory, such as New Criticism, that held that *only* the author’s intent mattered to the meaning of the text. In the case of Thompson this proves problematic since many critics were unable to put themselves in a position to find a determinable meaning in Thompson’s texts, either due to an inability to comprehend Thompson’s point of view or an inability to see beyond his tropes and narrative techniques in order to find meaning and so discarded them out of hand as being nonsense or simply not worthy of further study. I do not fully agree with Fromm though, since I do believe that reader-response analysis comes closer to understanding part of what Gonzo literature attempts to do, which does in fact require active interpretation from the reader and that the text does indeed have a determinable meaning.

Peter J. Rabinowitz confronts this issue in his book *Before Reading*, which deals with the problem within critical theory of finding and studying the core meanings of texts, and then placing them within the common body of literature – what deserves continuing attention, and what does not. The difficulty with literary critical theory is that since so many opinions are forwarded about how to study and understand texts that in the end all opinions are accepted on one level or another (20). If this is the case, then the entire enterprise of attempting to study and interpret texts proves entirely pointless since every opinion offered is considered “right” in some way. What Rabinowitz argues is that texts do have determinable meaning, but that a number of factors must be considered before this meaning can be found. As Rabinowitz says, if a text is written in such a way that it does not speak to a particular audience it results in a text that lacks focus (209), and so the first consideration that must be



made in the analysis of a text is the author's relation to the *authorial audience* – the hypothetical body of people that the author imagines will pick up his book, read it, and understand its meaning (21). This is the core authorial intent, and from there the work of the *actual audience*, “the flesh-and-blood people who read the book,” begins (20).

In the case of Thompson's writing, his hypothetical, authorial, audience varied based on where his writing was published. In the case of *Hell's Angels* his audience was highly generalized since it was meant to reach the widest body of people, but if a specific group had to be chosen it would likely be the widespread middle class – those people who paid the most attention to news reports and were most concerned with the threat posed by the Angels. In the case of his *Fear and Loathing* texts, since they were published in *Rolling Stone* originally, the authorial audience was tighter, concerned more with the 18-30 year old liberal, Rock-n-Roll demographic. When analyzing any text, Rabinowitz says, the analyst must first consider how well the text speaks to this authorial audience. After that the views of the real reader can be considered, a determinable (intended) meaning can be revealed, and then a different, lasting meaning may emerge from the text. This leads to how a text is received long after it was originally written, in order to see if it has a message that continues to speak to real readers in the present day. The analysis performed here in this study operated along the same lines, seeking the meaning within the text when it was written and who it was written for, and then finding elements in the text that continue to speak to modern audiences – namely, Thompson's focus upon vigilance in scrutinizing the sources and intent of information, and about how important it is for everyone to be able to pursue their dreams regardless of their place within their culture's class structure.

This lasting impact is what allows a text to be recognized within the context of the literary canon, but as Rabinowitz notes in *Before Reading*, determining what works are worthy of being canonized can be a highly political issue, when selected texts are chosen because they are the most compatible with normalized, accepted critical analytical theories (211-214). Other texts that might have a great deal to offer readers thus go ignored because they do not fit the accepted mold, or, as Rabinowitz said:

To put it in other terms, there are two ways of rethinking your reading experiences when a text fails to respond to the strategies with which it is approached: You can keep the text and change the strategy, or you can keep the strategy and toss out the text on the assumption that it is thin or incoherent. And when particular reading strategies – such as the New Critical strategies that dominated the 1940's and 1950's – are *normalized*, the latter course is the more likely, regardless of where the problems lie. (211)

This represents the very issue that Thompson's texts have to deal with, when analytical strategies unsuited to analyzing the many aspects of the texts are tried, fail, but the texts are discarded rather than rethinking the strategy used to approach them. Rabinowitz's reader-response approach, which recognizes authorial intent and reader-determined meanings, does what is most necessary when it comes to analyzing Thompson's works: recognizing that any analysis of Thompson's work cannot exclude the author as a person, or the historical situations in the text, as Thompson's writings actively communicate ideas to a current audience. But neither can an analyst ignore the meanings a real reader draws from the text, such as identifying universal human ideas that outlive the immediate temporal placement of the subject matter. Those who cannot place themselves within the position of the authorial

audience cannot hope to even begin to understand any text. This first step is where many have failed when it comes to understanding Thompson's writing.

Critics of Thompson's often vulgar, outrageous style, such as Winterowd, missed an important point that I have attempted to illustrate in my own analyses. Thompson's literary persona, in all of his Gonzo works, exists by nature as an unreliable narrator. The use of the unreliable narrator in his texts did not happen by accident, especially when comparing Thompson's considerably straighter work *Hell's Angels* to his *Fear and Loathing* pieces, and it formed the core of the Gonzo aesthetic. The readers' responsibility in these texts forces them to make sense of how and why the narrator interprets the world as he does, through warped senses and strong personal feelings. At the same time Thompson seeks to rise above the story itself and reveal how and why everything unfolds, so that the senses of the reader operate within the first-person and third person forms simultaneously. This represents the most significant aspect of the metajournalistic style that Thompson embraced: Aesthetically it allowed for his audience to connect more viscerally to the persona in the story while separating their more analytical side so that it could observe the ebb and flow of the story from an outside perspective. Thompson believed in testing individual perceptions of reality, since reality could often differ from person to person based on individual beliefs and ideas, influenced by the information that bombards everyone on a daily basis. The second concern directly connected to this, lies in just who or what controls this spread of information.

This serves as the central point of all of Thompson's writing. Scrutinize the source and authority of information. In *Hell's Angels* Thompson sought to expose the sloppy and misinformed journalism that exploded the reality of the Hell's Angels, making them appear ten times as strong as they were, and seeking to dehumanize them and limit any

understanding of them. But at the same time he also revealed how many of the fears were well-founded, but in order to authenticate these fears the whole truth had to be revealed in order for people to make up their own minds. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* provided a quasi-biographical platform for Thompson to reveal his greatest fears about America's future, and he saw the rise of Las Vegas as America's cultural low-point. The irony of this revelation came from a pair of self-admitted losers, sixties-era drug-fiends unable to let go of the past, and whose grasp on reality was tenuous at best.

In *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* Thompson sought an honest politician, and to see if there was any hope left for the American political process during a time of great national uncertainty. Thompson operated so far outside the normal political journalism circles that he could move largely unseen, until he began to expose the problems he saw in the process. Even at the end though, when he analyzed the end of the race, the conclusions are left to the reader. The conclusions were *always* left to the reader, because in Thompson's world the story never ended.

Thompson served as the focus and lens of the story, but a reader must create meaning for themselves. Thompson, after all, was a journalist first, and as a journalist his duty lay in imparting his knowledge to the public so that they possessed the information necessary to protect their rights. He valued knowledge and personal awareness beyond all else, and felt that too many people did not properly scrutinize the information they embraced, leading people to draw the wrong conclusions based off of faulty information. However, the style Thompson employed seemed to contradict this purpose. Vulgar, exaggerated substance abuse, open biases, and a general sense of chaos, it shocked the audience out of their comfort zone, but not for shock's sake alone. The use of shocking or grotesque language and imagery

in carnival compels those interacting with it to view their world from a different perspective than they normally would, and the same applied to Thompson's writing.

This inversion of voice and authority forces the mind to confront ideas and issues from as many aspects as possible, with the ultimate goal of discovering the closest definition of the truth and what constitutes reality. Thompson extolled the need to question the authority of information and the quest to determine the nature of reality. The journey and act of discovery always proved more valuable than conclusions, because as long as people proved willing to pursue knowledge and truth, they actively worked to defeat ignorance and intolerance, bettering humanity's place in the world. Gonzo's style and voice reflects this belief, and the journey in Gonzo always trumps any potential conclusions, because everything can change until death ends the journey. Despite Thompson's cynical point of view, Gonzo at its core hopes for change, but change can only come when humanity dispels its ignorance and willful stupidity, and this requires every person to remain vigilant against those who seek to alter their reality and lead them astray with flawed or maliciously biased information. This call to question the authority of information remains one of Thompson's most powerful lessons in the present era.

In the modern age of instant, digital information and the explosion of news sources has created an even direr situation than Thompson saw during his early days. "Newspapers are filled with stories indicating that the spirit of the 1960's is thriving today. The World Wide Web is an electronic version of the old underground newspapers. Antiglobalization protestors and Greenpeace activists make headlines by borrowing tactics that many of their parents used to effectively to help stop the war in Vietnam," says Jeff Kiseloff in his book *Generation on Fire* (2), and this point remains important as long as the distribution and

accessibility of information on the internet remains free. With the rise of internet media, modern critical and rhetorical theory has made a point that evaluation and verification of information sources is more important than ever, but Thompson saw the importance of this practice of evaluation back in 1965, when the collection and distribution of information required much tighter controls than today.

Despite a great deal of public acclaim for his work, Thompson remained a fringe writer, more of a popular curiosity than someone whose works could be taken seriously years and decades after his death as valuable pieces of literature. What helped Thompson in his writing also harmed him. When James N. Stull commented on Thompson possessing a “marginal personality,” he touched on a fact that eventually led to Thompson’s self-destruction, and it also explains the reason why I chose to focus on Thompson’s earliest works, rather than also include later pieces such as *Generation of Swine* and *The Curse of Lono*. Ralph Steadman, in his interview for *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson*, mentioned that Thompson had a bird named Eddie, and that whenever he was working on a project he would bang and rattle his cage, treating Eddie as a focal point for his ideas, seeming to require another persona to project his ideas onto. Steadman then commented that he essentially became Eddie in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” and the same applied to Oscar Zeta Acosta in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, both acting as living minds Thompson used to reflect his feelings and ideas. Thompson had a great sense of conviction in his ideas and opinions, but when it came to his own persona, it appeared tenuous at best.

Thus when fame struck him, this natural weakness in his personal character, which he often supplemented with an alter-ego in his writing, could not be satisfied in reality in the

same manner. After 1974, when his writing became more sporadic, Thompson adopted his manufactured persona as his own, since it became what people recognized about him. As Thompson himself said during an interview shown in the *Gonzo* documentary, there came a time when universities invited Thompson to come and speak at their functions, but he wasn't certain whom they wanted to see – Hunter Thompson, or Raoul Duke. As time went on and he essentially became a caricature of his own literary persona in real-life, the credibility he had developed up to that point evaporated. This flaw in Thompson's personality, potentially caused by undiagnosed though suspected bi-polar disorder, led to analyses performed in hindsight that either laud his crazy, unique style *because* of its uniqueness, or consider it a barrier to understanding him because he appears as nothing more than a man out of control. W. Ross Winterowd, cited at the beginning of this work, says as much when he condemns Thompson's post-*Hell's Angels* work, seeing only the exposed "compulsions and neuroses of the author" (Winterowd 93), but as Winterowd's critical commentary appeared more than a decade and a half after Thompson's personality collapse this criticism may result from a sense of perception infected by bias towards the Thompson that existed at that time. In the *Gonzo* documentary those closest to Thompson recognized that after this psychological spiral took effect, his Gonzo flair left him, and attempts to recapture it seemed only half-hearted. He helped to destroy his own legitimacy as a literary figure in the eyes of many in the academic world, and this unfairly tarnishes the work Thompson produced during his earliest days, when his new way of writing on the America he saw proved both original and refreshing. Like many notable writers, Thompson managed to produce his greatest work early on in his career, and the events that led to his literary decay afterwards should not influence any judgment of his best work.

As socio-political commentary during a highly uncertain time in America's history, *Hell's Angels*, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved," *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* provided needed commentary from a writer operating as an outsider, providing a style and point of view that jarred, provoked, and compelled readers to see strange situations in a new light. The value these works still hold today lie in their purpose and means of expression – a highly entertaining and satirical look at aspects of American society that also encourages thought and debate about what American society considers real and just, and how people need to remain aware and conscious of their responsibility to protect their rights by scrutinizing the sources and intent of the information they absorb. Ignorance stands as man's greatest enemy, and sometimes in order to see all sides of a story reality must be altered and twisted, facts obscured by fabulation and surrealism, forcing the mind to make sense of what appears as pure chaos. Only then can man consider all sides of an issue and defeat ignorance, which leads to hate and injustice. What Salvador Dali did for art, Hunter S. Thompson did for literature, and the craft and intent of the Gonzo texts transcend any belief that they exist as nothing more than the ravings of a drug-soaked egomaniac – in fact, they represent the thoughts, fears, hopes, and desires of a surprisingly sensitive, tragic, and civic-minded individual who only wanted people to dispel ignorance and actively think for themselves, in order to protect their rights and freedoms.



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